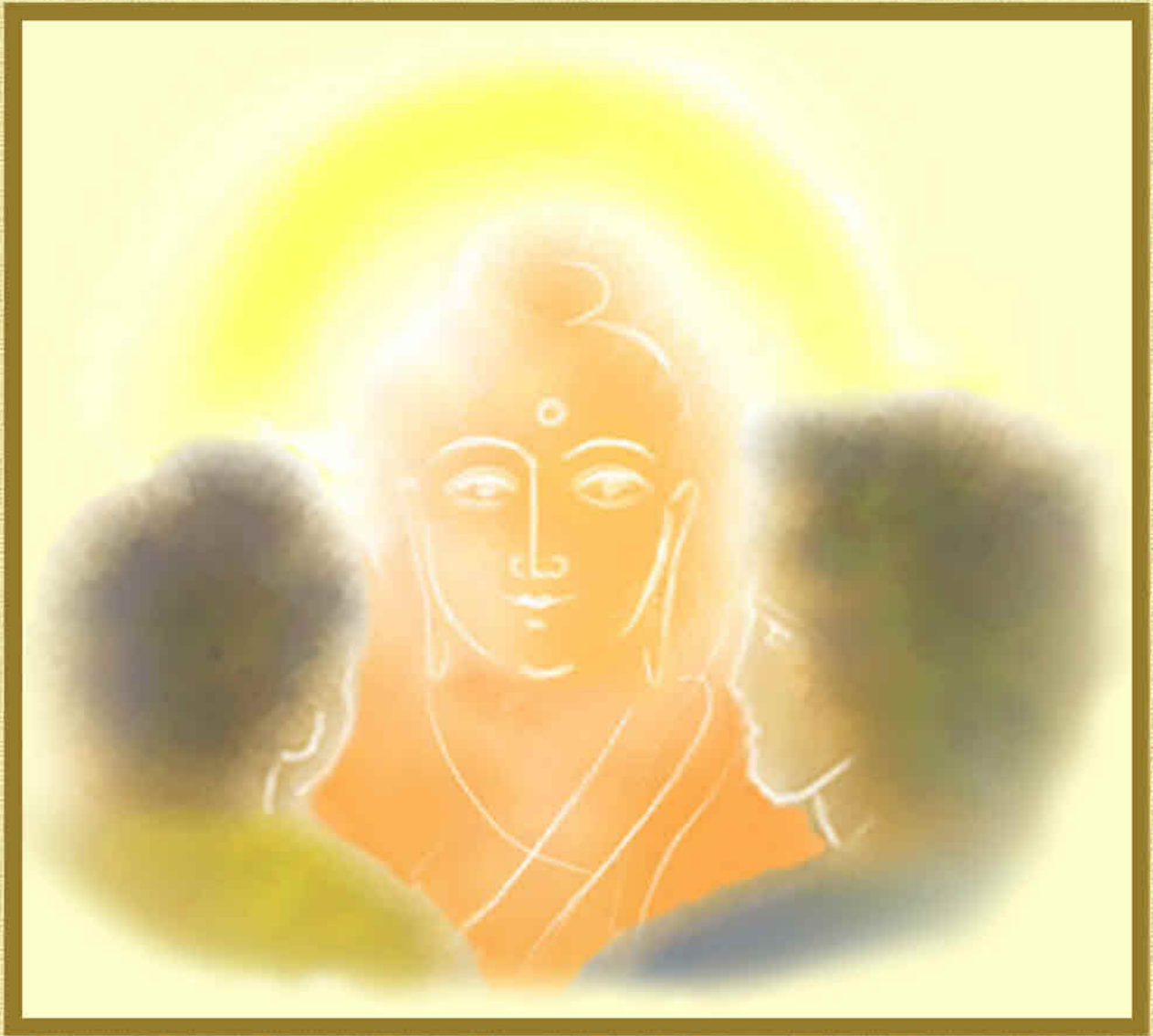


BuddhaSmile



by

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BuddhaSmile—Buddhism Here and Now

Eight graduating chapters of spiritual awakening reveal the 2,600-year-old practice of the Buddha as alive and relevant in the 21st century and a part of our everyday lives—to be present, understanding and compassionate. The work offers a common sense approach to Buddhism as practical insights in to your busy lives.

A collaboration between an American Buddhist monk and an artist based in England, our hope is that **BuddhaSmile** be a useful source of peace and contentment for the practitioners.

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“For the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world.”

ABOUT US



Roberto Vicente is the writer of the text. Written while a lay person, he has since gone to ordain as a monk taking the name of Brother Pho Quan. He follows the practise and teaching of the Pali Cannon



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CHAPTER ONE AWAKENING—HERE, NOW!



As he walked the dusty roads of Northern India, villagers struck by his peaceful presence would stop the Buddha.

"Are you a God?" one would ask.

"No," the Buddha replied.

"Are you a spirit?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

"I am awake." And the Buddha smiled gently.

OUR SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

"I AM AWAKE"...such a simple, direct and thought provoking response. How many of us are truly awake? Awake, not just as in having been aroused by the alarm clock to stumble out of bed and begin our day, but awake as to know and understand who we really are. Who among us can honestly say that they know themselves? What causes us to laugh, cry, hate or love? What is this life that we are leading?

We are born, nursed, held and caressed. Someone is there to catch us as we learn how to walk and sit up with us through the long nights when we are sick. We learn to ride a bike or roller skates. We fall and cry, skinning our knees, and are encouraged

to try once again. We take piano or dance lessons or join the Boy Scouts or little league. We attend school for years. Some of us will go on to receive a university degree and have a professional career. Others will work a trade. Most of us will marry (many to divorce), have children (2.5 of them!), work 40 hours a week, plan for retirement, get a handful of traffic tickets, take two week vacations to Disneyland or the Grand Canyon, buy a home with a 30 year mortgage, see our children through activities and school, tend to our ailing parents, and then age and die ourselves.

But have we been truly "awake"? Why have our lives turned out the way they have? Why do we act and react the way we do? How have our habits and impulses, likes and dislikes charged and changed our lives? How have our desires or fears to run off compromised and blinded us?

To be "awake" is to be able to understand all of the conflicting elements that have contributed to our lives, making us the people we are. To be "awake" is to ask questions, to wonder why, to look deeply. To be "awake" is to try and understand and come to terms with our struggles. To be "awake" is to stir from our automatic tendency to step into situations and relationships and not just wait for an affair to sour or to be impatient for the thousandth time with a family member. To be "awake" is to be in the here and now, the present moment, and not just "awake" to past sorrows or future adventures, but to the moment just as it is. To be "awake" is to understand and take responsibility for our being and our well-being while sharing in the well-being of others. To be "awake" is to be alive to all that exists in the here and now.

A few of us might scratch our heads and wonder what it is all about. Why are our lives going the way they are? But we fall back into forgetfulness. We return to being automatic and robot-like, victims of our habits and impulses. We are close to being out of control. Our spiritual awakening, this desire for peace and understanding, usually comes after many repeated let downs, from a hard lesson learned, or from the desire for a more meaningful and fulfilling life.

HERE, NOW!

Here and now is the only way it can be. Here and now is the way it has always been. Here and now, we are. Here and now are our loved ones, friends, work ...here and now before us is the earth and the universe, all the simple grandeur. Despite all of our worrying to plan and change, collect and use, to make and tear down, we can only be in one place—here and now.

What about the future? Dilemmas and decisions always crop up, needing to be looked after. But where are you really? In the here and now. We tend to dwell on the past. When we do, we are in the here and now so it is not really the past. You can't get away from the present. It is everywhere you go. Use it! The present is what saves us; the crucial moment where the seed of our spiritual awakening takes root, is nurtured, develops and blossoms. All the past comes alive here in our today. It is in the now that our tomorrows begin.

We all have genuine longings for peace and understanding in our lives. However, this spiritual awakening has less to do with deep philosophical answers, sacrificing or material gains, and everything with relating and touching base with our ordinary feelings and everyday lives. Understanding doesn't come from living in isolation on a desert island (we're already too separated and have too much anonymity in this fast-paced, modern world of ours). Nor does it come from searching for treasures in some remote corner of the world. It is all right in front of us. Understanding comes from connecting "here and now" with the present as our happiness. By touching base with our family, friends and work, we are awake and alive. Until we can understand ourselves and bring ease and compassion into our lives, we may as well be on the dark side of the moon. It is living in the here and now that will lead us to freedom and awakening. Our realization and discovery is in the here and now. All the answers are here in the present, in the ongoing puzzle pieces that make up our lives.

Siddhartha Gautama became known as "The Awakened One", the Buddha (the verb literally means awake and so an awakened or enlightened person, a Buddha). He was aware and in touch with the "here and now". Each one of us has the capability and the potential to awaken to his or her full life in the "here and now". Like all of us, the Buddha was human and feeling, having lived and died. He saw through his own difficulties and transcended his problems which were similar to our own problems. There were no claims to immortality or divine inspiration, which was a first in the history of spiritual practices and religions. His insights and awakening came from practical experience dealing with everyday life, learning and understanding from the world around him. We, too, can be mindful of the present and make the most of our lives as a spiritual practice. We, too, can wonder and honestly investigate, ask questions and awaken, like Buddha, towards understanding and compassion.

As a spiritual guide, the Buddha keeps us directed, wanting each person to awaken and understand in the "here and now". He wasn't an oracle spouting answers for the sake of answering questions. His every word tried to evoke understanding and spark realization. There could be no other way. He could not do it for us. He did what was right for himself and we must do what is right for ourselves. Our spiritual awakening is one of direct personal experience and understanding, leading to wisdom and compassion. If the insights prove helpful, that is wonderful but if not, take what you can use and leave the rest.

Once, stopping at the village of Kesaputta, the Buddha was rightly questioned by the people. "There are many different teachers that come to Kesaputta. For us uncertainty arises and doubts arise concerning them "who indeed of these venerable teachers speaks truly, who speaks falsely?" And here, the Buddha answered honestly, "It is indeed fitting to be uncertain, fitting to be doubtful... Do not go by hearsay, nor by what is handed down by others, nor by what people say, nor by what is stated on the authority of your traditional teachings...nor out of respect thinking a teacher must be respected, but when you know for yourselves that these teachings lead to well-being and happiness, then you should stay with them."

How candid, how straightforward. Of course, the Buddha meant that his own offerings and insights should be rightly challenged and investigated and not just blindly accepted. Without misleading, he wanted peoples' awakening and freedom. His awakening could be understood, applied and practiced by all. It was simple, accessible and without complications. He spoke to peasants, charwomen, farmers, lepers, kings and queens, governors, merchants and untouchables. He was able to share his knowledge in a skillful manner so that everyone could benefit, translating that wisdom into their own spiritual awakening and practice. He brought healing and transformation into their lives. This was paramount. The Buddha was not just a parrot uttering platitudes. He wasn't looking for "hangers on" to gullibly accept his every word. In the end, we come to our own conclusions and bring understanding and compassion to our own lives.

PROBLEMS AS ANSWERS

The Buddha looked at our troubled humanity and wondered why things rarely got any better. Why weren't we happy? He looked deeply at our suffering and problems. Our modern wealth of technology, support and access, has made things easier for more people than at any other time in history. But, ultimately, are we any happier? How do we cope and bring understanding and compassion to our suffering and problems?

From the Buddha's insight we understand our suffering and problems are on three levels: first, all the ordinary problems and difficulties we have in common such as the aches and pains of our bodies, sickness, not getting what we want, encounters with people, and all the every day upsets of commuter traffic or having to go to three stores for a special refill. These are the problems and hardships of things just not going smoothly. Second, there exists the suffering and problems brought about by change. Nothing lasts forever. Mountains will crumble, the sun will dim, the good time we had on a vacation comes to an end, the energy that makes up our bodies runs down.

And third, the suffering we ourselves add and contribute to as things change around us in the moment-to-moment altering of our moods from happy to sad, from excited to bored. Nothing remains the same for very long. This is a suffering and unhappiness we ourselves (our egos doing battle) contribute to as we fuss or are angry or bitter with the changes and uncertainty around us.

Suffering and problems are so realistically exposed that a negative and pessimistic view and opinion of the Buddha and his insights have developed. How to deal with and solve our problems was his focus. "I teach suffering and the end of suffering," the Buddha repeated with a clear mind, over and over again. He was not one to get caught up in any "off-base" and "out-of-touch" philosophical debates. Nor was he sidetracked by useless questions that didn't relate to the here and now. He often used the word suffering but in the context that we have a problem, dissatisfaction or annoyance. We do have suffering and problems (our hoping the good times will always last or carrying around with us anger and bitterness over a situation), but not everything is suffering or a problem. Is there suffering in a birthday party, watching a beautiful sunset or eating a tasty pizza? No, not everything is suffering. However, we

have to be on guard, in the here and now, or suffering and problems will creep up on us.

Believe it or not, as strange as it might seem, suffering is a salvation. Our problems are a way out from getting into deeper and more upsetting situations. How wonderful to learn from our mistakes or, better put, from our less than being mindful, in the present and in touch with things, ourselves, people and events as they truly are. Our awakening is not about tearing down or pushing away our problems. Nor is it about hate for things when they don't go right. Awakening is deep understanding, having patience, tolerance, acceptance and care.

There is hope, joy and celebration, finally understanding ourselves. This is awakening, life as a spiritual practice; problems as answers. We each carry and are overwhelmed by our own personal "bag" of suffering and problems we carry around. We need to learn and understand from them. How often do we contribute and add to that burdensome bag of problems we are forever lugging around? We can take constructive responsibility for our lives. What we think of as on the surface as happiness, may in fact be bringing us greater pain and sadness through clinging or our fear. We are forever carrying around with us this heavy, loaded bag of problems. It doesn't have to be this way; the way it's always been. First we must honestly try and understand the here and now.

This may not be the fireworks show or the glamour you had in mind or were looking for. But a deeper fulfilment, steadiness and ease, and awakening to life is known through understanding ourselves, our problems as answers. Even though our life experiences make our practice and awakening seem individual, a personal journey, we return and reconnect with the shared values and humanity that bind us all together.

We give and share our insight and compassion and return goodwill to others. In the end, the Buddha smiled.

What was so rewarding that the Buddha gave a gentle smile like Da Vinci's Mona Lisa; half coy as if he knew a secret, half revealing an answer, happy, caring and reassuring? He revealed through his person, his presence, as he walked and in his every action, showing in the glint of his eyes and revealed in his gentle smile, seen by every person he passed and made contact with, an awakened, present and compassionate nature. He had understood and finished with his suffering and problems.

Here was a gaze and smile revealing a person free of all conflicts. One who was content and satisfied with things just as they are in the moment. After all, it could be no other way. A gaze and smile of one who had finished with struggling. He communicated, too, through a Noble Silence, a message of both inner and outer peace. A gaze and smile of one finished with prejudice, hatred and anger, ill-will and aggression, hostility and violence. A gaze and smile that didn't threaten or intend harm. Here was a gaze and smile which showed gentleness and caring, revealing an easy nature and deep calm, a person who lived a humble bliss. A gaze and smile which helped, were hopeful, transforming and healing. A gaze and smile which reassured and brought ease to tormented, worried and fearful minds. His

was a gaze and smile that brought people back into the present and out of their forgetfulness.

When he took on his life as a mendicant (a person living solely from the generosity of others), the Buddha knew that not everyone would grasp his awakening message. Yet some would have a "little dust over their eyes", and would benefit. No, not all would awaken and understand but hope and compassion were there for all, and the Buddha smiled. Here and now, we too, can join with the Buddha and come to understand our problems as answers. We can be aware and smile like the Buddha.

TURNING THE WHEEL OF TRUTH - The Middle Way and The Four Noble Truths

In his first discourse shared with five practicing ascetics, "the Turning of the Wheel of Truth (the Dharma)" was put into motion. The Buddha had "realized the highest awakening": in-between our intense search for fun and our hardship, hostility and conflicts, there is a Middle Way. In-between our liking and disliking; in-between all our pleasures, wanting, fears and bitterness is a deep peace. In this in-between of extremes and the limitations we (our egos) place on ourselves, there is a settling understanding. There is an acceptance and letting go without adding to our further suffering and problems. We don't have to be the person we've been or thought ourselves to be (more on this is detailed in "This Self that is Not a Self" section - see post). We don't have to be anyone or act out anymore. So, should we be tempted to bite on a baited hook, dangling there in front of us? Whether it is in the form of craving for more material goods, lust or sexual longings coming out of loneliness, hating and conflict with others and things different than us nor part of our normal routine; impatient when something doesn't go our way; fearful or threatened by the unknown; living in anger or bitterness over past let downs, we simply don't have to go for the bait or fall into the same old desires, attachments, fear or angry battles. We don't have to nip at the dangling bait!

We don't have to act and react in the same long-standing ways we have been for all of our lives. We can be mindful, at ease and rest in well-being. We can be aware and understanding. We can be "awake" without having to be or do anything that is compromising; greedy to want, to curse in anger, or to be hostile when things aren't going our way. The Buddha went on to say, "the Middle Way... avoids both these extremes: giving vision, giving knowledge, it leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. It is a state without suffering... and it is the right way. Therefore this is a state without conflict."

To help us arrive at this Middle Way of compassionate and peaceful understanding, the Buddha set up practical guidelines to help us apply the insights and teachings to our own lives. To use a contemporary metaphor, for a moment, it would be fair to see the Buddha as a topnotch helmsman. He was like a skipper able to guide, navigate and traverse the uncertain waters of attachment to pleasures. He was able to steer through lustful or greedy seas, pitching and rolling storm waters of angry squalls and hatred, jealousy and insecurity, and lead us out from all our doubts, fears and hardships.

In this, his first discourse to five practicing, well-trained meditators, the Buddha spoke in their common cultural and shared language. He did not have to go into word for word detail as he later would. The core of his guidance is touched upon and implied here in this, his first talk after his Awakening: impermanence and change in life keep us longing for security and attached to pleasures or running in aversion and always reacting out of a never ending suffering; non-self (if we go to extremes and separating as in liking and disliking then the Middle Way would be one of understanding and equanimity, free of our "old" limiting self or any "self"); the Four Noble Truths that suffering and problems do have a beginning and also a way out; the Noble Eightfold Path as compassionate tools to apply in our everyday lives and, Nirvana, too, is implied as the finale of our problems (free of that selfish craving which keeps us at odds with situations as they arise).

But, it is the Buddha as the "Great Physician," his ability to clinically diagnose a problem and cure, and prescribe an adequate course, which much more accurately describes his role as he diagnoses "the four truths:" we identify that we do have suffering or a problem; understand the source and root of the suffering or problem; know that the suffering and problem are treatable and, finally, bring healing and transformation to the suffering or problem. These are the Four Noble Truths (they are called Noble Truths because they do not seek to answer divine or eternal questions, but focus on life in the here and now) and he went on to detail a unique three part treatment we can always put to use: identify, understanding, healing and/or transformation. For each step of the way we have a prescription to keep in mind, to help us focus and understand. We can then use this as an aid to better comprehend our problems and see them in the present for what they are and not be overwhelmed by them.

The First Noble Truth: identify (know), we admit to having a problem, understanding that we do have a problem; healing and transformation come as we understand that we have a problem.

The Second Noble Truth: identify (know) honestly the cause of our problem; understanding deeply the cause of our problem; healing and transformation come from knowing the cause of our problem.

The Third Noble Truth: identify (know) the potential end of our problem; understanding will lead to the end of our problem; healing and transformation will bring about well-being and the end of our problem.

The Fourth Noble Truth: identify (know) that there is a solution to our problem; understanding the solution to our problem; healing and transformation as practiced through the Middle Way Noble Eightfold Path leads to well-being and to the solution of our problem (the Eightfold Path is looked at in detail under its own section).

A spiritual practice brings us closer to who we are and to a better relationship with everything around us. Yes, including understanding our suffering and problems which

in turn leads us to well-being. This is the reward for our awakened journey; to know, to understand, to deal openly without fear, to be compassionate with ourselves and all others.

FROM PRINCE TO THE AWAKENED ONE

The Buddha was born about 2,600 years ago as Prince Siddhartha Gautama in a small kingdom of Northern India in what today would be considered Nepal. Legends and stories have arisen from this time. From what we do know, his mother died shortly after his birth. In a palace dominated by his father, he was cared for by his aunt. The young Prince lived a life of leisure and luxury ("I lived in refinement, utmost refinement... I had three palaces: one for the cold season, one for the hot season, one for the rainy season.").

Siddhartha went on to marry Princess Yasodhora and had one son, Rahula. It was expected that Siddhartha would carry on the monarchy after his father passed away. But gnawing questions and an uneasiness about life caused Siddhartha to head in a very different direction ("Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought[s] occurred to me... subject to aging... subject to illness...subject to death...").

At the age of 29, the Prince set out to answer these questions. Leaving the palace, he took on the life of a Bodhisattva, one on the path to Awakening ("Having shaved off my hair and beard, though my parents wished otherwise and were grieving with tears on their faces, I put on the robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness.").

Here for the next six years, Siddhartha studied with various meditation masters, soon equaling each until he had learned all that he could from them. Still he felt that he had not found the answers to his questions. He went on to practice severe asceticism, eating only a handful of food each day ("My body became extremely emaciated... My spine stood out... My ribs jutted out... But with this racking practice of austerities I hadn't attained any superior human state, any distinction in knowledge of vision worthy of noble ones. Could there be another path to Awakening?").

He meditated intensely and pushed himself so hard that he came close to the brink of death. Siddhartha recalled a childhood memory of sitting in the shade of a roseapple tree. Here was a moment of calm and ease, free from desires and distractions ("Following on that memory, came the realization: ' This is the path to enlightenment.'").

He abandoned all austerities and having regained his strength, Siddhartha made a vow to sit meditating until he was awakened and fully understood. Under the Bodhi tree, he meditated deeply and saw "Three True Knowledge's": his many past lives and how he passed from one to the next and how each played itself out, the causes and effects leading to each; he saw how people's actions lead them into fortunate and unfortunate states; and he saw how suffering and problems came in to existence and the way out of suffering and problems ("When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated...").

Now awakened, seeing through all the causes and effects, the Buddha had come to the great realization on the Truth of Nature (or the Dharma): The Middle Way of peaceful intention and free of selfish conflicts; impermanence and change to everything in the world and the universe; non-self as free of our long standing habits and impulses; the Four Noble Truths relating to our problems and the Noble Eightfold Path as the way leading out from our problems and having compassion for all. Siddhartha had awakened, he was the Buddha ("My heart...was released, from... sensuality, from... becoming, from... ignorance").

For the next 45 years the Buddha traveled by foot through Northern India and tirelessly taught and shared his insights and compassion with all until his death in Kusinara at the age of 80. Today the same compassionate message resounds. Buddhism (or perhaps more accurately it should be known as the Dharma, the Truth or the Way) has reached around the globe. The tradition of the Buddha has been kept alive through three main lineages (Theravada, "the teaching of the Elders", in Sri Lanka, Ceylon, Burma and Thailand; Mahayana, "the Great Vehicle", in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam; Vajrayana, "the Diamond Vehicle", associated with Tibet). Each country has given its own cultural twists to Buddhism but the original teachings are followed closely.

Today an estimated 750 million people follow the understanding and compassionate insights of the Buddha. Many people have come to know the great value of a regular meditation practice, the calming and peace instilled in them allowing for mindfulness, as well as the insight

and compassion of the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and applying the constructive guidelines of the Noble Eightfold Path to their lives. But it would be unfair to attribute it all to the Buddha. There were countless others before him. And now, how many more have followed in his serene footsteps? In Siddhartha Gautama an energy, a will, a deep understanding, a compassion and an awakening to the frail human role in the vast universe connected, arose and came to fruition. It took all those who came before him to lead to his awakening, and the dedication of many others to share the wisdom to this day. Now they all reach out to us and lend their insight to our own spiritual practice and awakening.

"Do not think lightly of goodness," the Buddha noted, "saying, 'Nothing will help me improve'. A pitcher is filled with water by a steady stream of drops. Likewise, the wise person improves and achieves well-being a little at a time."

LIFE PRACTICE

Try and ask yourself during the day as you become busy at work or home, "where am I?". This would serve as a reminder to help keep you in touch with the present. It will help draw you back into the here and now. You can, too easily, get distracted with work and running around. Are you really in the present moment or are you daydreaming, planning for the future or rehashing some 10 year old heartache?

While sitting at your desk during a lull in activity, or waiting at a red light in your car, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. A pause in the action will help remind you exactly where you are. Ask yourself, "Who am I?" Feel how you change during

the course of the day, becoming so many different people. Many moods strike us all day long. However, try and remain on an even keel. See how you try and please some people, wrestle with other personalities, and accept people. Feel how the course of the day takes you around like a buzzing bee; all the energy and effort used in this daily ritual of wanting, becoming, fearing and acting out. Most of life's situations are imagined and colored by our naive perceptions, expectations, wants and fears.

Practice being awake. See and feel, know where you are. Just what thoughts and sensations are passing through you. Should you step outside take note of the afternoon, breathe in deeply the fresh air. Just what kind of day is it, gray or sunny, blue skies or cloudy? Look and feel. Look up at the sky once out of your car and see what's around you. When opening doors and entering a room, office or home, pause and get a feel for the setting. Don't just pass through with blinders on. What is around you? Where are you? Spice up your day with mindfulness!

Be awake.

Try and honestly greet others during the day and be in the present moment with them. Be sincere as you meet other people. Don't just mentally dismiss them. Too often we are absent minded, and go from one activity to the next without seeing anything or noticing anyone. Take the time to bring patience and compassion into your life. Practice listening intently to others as they speak. Do you drift in and out from the present moment bored, fantasizing, angry or wishing for the moment to be over with? Feel your impatience, doubts, fears and anger as they come up. Think about how they weigh you down.

Smile! Go on and smile! It doesn't cost anything and it won't hurt. Smiling shows that you know you are awake. Feel the goodness and change in your attitude that a smile brings you. Smiling can help break up whatever tension that you might be feeling. It also brings joyful awakening to your life. While smiling, say to yourself, "Here and now...here and now". Or try, "Awake and aware... awake and aware".

Smile a little as you become frustrated or "knotted up". Smile like the Buddha. Become acquainted with the Buddha that resides within you.

Be that awakened, understanding, caring and compassionate person that is in all of us. Feel joy, happiness, laughter and smile. Know what it's like to be light hearted and to let go of your worries, anger and doubts. Not everything is suffering, not if you're awake! But most of all, try and be in the present moment whatever the situation; pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Be awake and aware... awake and aware. Smile in awareness of the moment and who you are.

Smile, you are awakened.

CHAPTER TWO MEDITATION— A PAUSE FROM OUR HABITS AND IMPULSES



A group of people gathered sitting in a half circle on the ground before the Buddha. The Buddha sat in the shade of a hut, legs crossed *in the full-lotus position*.

"What is gained through meditation, Blessed One?" one of the lay practitioners spoke up and asked.

"Nothing at all," the Buddha replied.

The group looked at each other not understanding.

"Then, Blessed One, what good is it?"

"Let me tell you what I lost through meditation: sickness, anger, depression, insecurity, the burden of old age, the fear of death. That is the good of meditation, which leads to Nirvana."

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Little do you realize, but you have been meditating your whole life. There isn't a day that goes by that you have not meditated. What, me meditating? Go on! I don't meditate. Where would I get the time? And anyway, even if I did have the time, I'm just not the meditating type.

Sitting, stopped in bumper-to-bumper traffic you stare off into space. You're not paying attention to the radio news report. You've stopped thinking about the deadline at work, whose birthday is coming up next in the family, or browsing the Internet for a cheaper mortgage. It isn't until the guy behind you taps his horn that you're stirred back into the commuter grind. Then that flood of thinking comes back as you sigh and put the car into gear. Where were you? What happened in those moments when you just drifted off? Where did the time go? Believe it or not, you were meditating!

And what about those times in the shower with the hot water stinging your back as you stand there unwinding, not thinking of anything. You relaxed and felt refreshed, didn't you? Or the times you crash on the couch and forget the TV or stereo is going, just sort of spaced out. Or, having come back from work or shopping, you just sit down quietly for a few minutes as you catch your breath. What would you call these occurrences? Waiting in the doctor's office, you look up surprised when your name is called. Where did the time go? Or while sipping a cup of coffee or tea, you sit with your legs crossed when at the kitchen table and only some time later when the refrigerator clicks do you become alert. You remember the chores and errands you have to do and you quickly run off, setting the cup and saucer in the sink. What was happening? At work, your mind goes blank and you sit quietly before the phone rings or a coworker calls your name, jarring you back. Yes, these were all meditation breaks, meditative moments.

You have been meditating for years, for all of your life. You may not call it meditating but taking a break, daydreaming or being lazy. Call it what you will. The effects were one of quiet, stillness, relaxation, a letting go and unwinding. You weren't focused and concentrating. You weren't using all the energy it takes to plot, seduce, worry or like and dislike. For a moment all of yourself-absorption stopped and nothing earth shattering happened. It's not too often in our busy, fast-moving lives where nothing happens. We are quiet, still and at ease in the here and now.

There is a great misconception about meditation. Thoughts of a long, gray-haired guru sitting in a pretzel-like, contorted position come to mind (even of sleeping on nails and walking on a bed of hot coals!). Wild psychedelic lights and "turning on and dropping out" and the whole whirl of the 1960's, the Beatles visiting India and sitar music, and the high pitched voice of the Maharishi flash before us. There are even fears of cult groups, brain washing and getting your head shaved. But meditation has nothing to do with any of these things and everything to do with just bringing a moment of quiet and stillness to your life. You relax and let go of your many habits and impulses to act and react, to do and be, and the compulsiveness you have to keep busy at all times. The simple act of sitting quietly and allowing for a pause of peace is one of the single most healing and rewarding things we can do for ourselves. This is the "work" of a spiritual practice.

As mentioned in the beginning by the Buddha, there is nothing special to be gained, achieved, be or become in meditation. Ironically, it's the quiet, the stillness and the peaceful pause in our lives that allow for patience, acceptance and understanding to develop and for inner tranquility to blossom.

Meditation is about opening up and accepting, coming into contact and connecting with that tender and benevolent side which all of us have. It is not about deadlines and hostility or snapping into shape or performing like a trained seal with a ball balanced on its nose. Nor is meditation about sitting like a hen for countless hours trying to hatch eggs, expecting a reward. But through stillness and just being at rest, we get to know and be at ease with ourselves, rather than always having to lash out at the world. We take a well-deserved break from all our anger, doubts, impatience, fears and all the many unproductive habits that have managed to creep into our lives.

Our minds are filled with such a high volume of activity. We are so busy with thoughts of past occurrences, or tomorrow's agenda that we've lost contact with the moment. We live in a blur, out of touch with who we are and how things are in the present. Then, too, we are in such a constant state of being "on"; of wanting, needing, desiring and liking. This basic battle of liking and disliking is subtly played out in every moment, situation, encounter and relationship of our lives. We like certain situations and people so we become attached and cling to them. Then on the other hand, we dislike certain situations and people so we push them away and hate. The amount of energy we use through life's dramas and upsets is exhausting. Our lives are a battlefield of turmoil, seething, anxious and painful. Our lives have become the equivalent of war—so much wounding, firing, retaliation, attacking and defending. These are the affects generated in ourselves and those around us by our not being in the present and mindful of our actions.

But through meditation, a time for stillness and quiet is made; a time for healing is found. We need to occasionally stop so that we can see clearly and not be in a dizzy rush. Meditation is peaceful pause from all our habits and impulses, our compulsive acting and reacting and doing battle with each encounter, circumstance, person and event that comes up is known. An understanding develops. Life doesn't have to be about all this liking and disliking and about going to extremes. There can be simple acceptance, and having patience with ourselves and others around us. This is the Middle Way, an understanding and compassionate alternative.

A regular sitting practice of a half hour daily in our demanding, fast-paced lives, (if not three to five times a week), will not only bring less sickness (how often are we not made ill from our emotional stress?) but rejuvenate and bring a certain amount of youthfulness back to our bodies. The energy of worrying and liking and disliking evaporates, translating to peacefulness of body and thoughts. Anger from not getting what we want from people or out of situations, is turned to tolerance and acceptance. People and situations are just the way they are and we relax, resting in the moment. Depression from needless worry about things that took place twenty years before or the lack of acceptance and understanding of ourselves, slowly and gradually clears to patience and well-being. Insecurity because of childhood trauma and our many fears and phobias are understood, controlled and then healed. The burden of old age is lifted and gives way to maturity. The fear of death and oblivion gives way to the deep understanding that we share with everyone around us. This earth, our home, and the greater forces of all the universe are connected and in harmony with each other.

All this from just sitting? It can't be. How can a moment of meditation do so much, make such a change, such a difference? Well, give it a try and you'll see. What do you have to lose? Get ready for some pleasant surprises. Almost miraculously, as we slow down all our buzzing and flitting about, all our habits and impulses and our acting and reacting, you'll see for yourself and understand how a regular meditation practice allows for a dialogue and a relationship between our experiences, thoughts and body to develop.

All too often, we separate an event as just thinking, or a thought, but for every pleasure, every pain, for every joy, every sadness, for every triumph, every defeat, there is a connection of thought and body. Not only do we hate something as a thought but also feel how the emotion fixes in your body—upset stomach, headache, tensing and knotting of muscles, breathing heavier.

Not only do we love something as a thought but feel how the emotion fixes in your body—easier breathing, relaxing of all our muscles, a feeling of strength, better health and light-heartedness take hold. As our thoughts slow down, we also enter into a natural, physical ease. We come to the great understanding that all is not suffering nor do things have to be so extreme and divided (the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths applied).

We note that our habit of seeing things in a certain limited way then reacting with expectations, causes us to focus and narrow our thoughts, much like a horse gnaws on its bit. So too do our habits cause us to seize a thought and tear it apart with prejudice, hatred and fear. These habits and impulses to separate things, events and people into categories (and as foreign from us), is what brings us into conflict and upset. Our suffering and problems all lead from this separation. With a regular meditation practice, awakening and a maturity flower. This directs us down the path of deeper understanding; an opening to the spaciousness of our minds as they really are. We find that what was once an out-of-control, endless waterfall of busy thoughts, acting and impulsiveness, is in short order a mind capable of calm, peace and well-being. The mind naturally rests in a vastness and openness of true inner peace. We relate to experiences on a newfound, gentler level without aggression, without hostility driving us on towards more suffering and problems. We rest at ease in the here and now.

SITTING MEDITATION

After finding a quiet room in the house, you're ready to try meditation. You deserve this moment of quiet to regenerate yourself. You can sit on a cushion with your legs crossed, sit in a chair, or even lay on the floor on your back, a pillow under your knees to relieve lower back stress. Whatever position you choose, using the right body language and posture as well as bringing good intentions or attitude is important to meditation. Should you be cross-legged or sitting, try not to sit up with your back too erect, forced or rigid. Be careful not to be lazy or leaning off to one side. Think of yourself as a cat, stretching and fluffing up, and ease yourself into a relaxed and

comfortable posture. With your eyes closed, try dropping your chin down a bit, lessening the tension and pressure on your neck. Hold your hands, crossing the left hand cupped over the right hand, and have them rest near your belly or abdomen. Or you can have your hands resting supported, on your knees. Just be comfortable. You may feel some initial awkwardness as you relax into the position and formal sitting.

Now, that you are finally sitting, what is next? Our whole lives are about breathing. How far would you get without taking a breath? This is one of the most overlooked activities of the body. You take it for granted that you're always going to breathe. You may even find it boring but imagine if you suddenly couldn't breathe. That's a sobering thought, isn't it? Everything we do starts with the breath. We breathe all night long while sleeping. Our breath is our anchor and a good focal point.

Take three deep centering breaths to help get you grounded and "feel" the sitting. Take a moment to just feel yourself and sense your attitude as you breathe. Touch base with your breath, thoughts and body. Breathe, feel how you've arrived. Have you been busy or worried? Note the high volume of mental activity you normally carry with you during the day; the business of thought patterns, whether you've been frustrated about something, angry, impatient or happy and having a good day. Breathe and get a feel for your surroundings in the here and now. Where are you? What can you hear around you? Can you smell anything? Do you feel your body sitting, the pressure of certain areas more than others—buttocks, knees, back or legs? Here, at the start of each meditation, you are easing into the moment. Try to gradually leave the business of the day and your activities behind. Meditation is not about flipping a switch and falling into a trance. It is an awareness of our breaths, thoughts and body; a deep understanding and joining in the present moment. Sense your state of mind and your body language. Take the time to connect with yourself in the here and now. Meditation is about being present and mindful, awake to the moment as it is.

Breathe, sensing and feeling your mind. Don't deny your thoughts. Feel how you have arrived. What is your attitude? Breathe and feel as you sit. Notice the business of your thought activity, that high volume of inner dialogue we carry around with us chattering throughout the day. Go ahead and allow yourself to relax. Get away from all those habits and impulses. Take a break from having "to be" and "do".

A moment of body scanning will help you ease into the sitting. This moment will reveal any troubled (or "hot spots") in your body. Start with your forehead and feel if it's wrinkled or knotted. Try and relax and let loose in this area. Now, are your eyebrows arched or standing up like question marks, or furrowed and meeting in the middle? Just let go and relax. Feel your eyelids. The surface skin is very, very sensitive and delicate. Have you been squinting or are your eyes wrinkled with tension? Just release a bit, not holding on so tightly.

And what about your teeth and jaw muscles? Do you have the habit of grinding your teeth? Is your jaw locked or tightly clenched? Just let your lower jaw drop a bit and feel the pressure and tension drop and fade away. Are your lips tightly pinched? Are you frowning? Just smile gently, softly to yourself, and feel the easing of body and thoughts.

Is your throat tight like a harp chord or like a clothes' line? Swallow three times and consciously feel the muscles loosen and tension dissolve and fade away. A hot spot of pressure and tension are the shoulders. Feel them. Most times, our shoulders are pushed and squeezed up toward our necks and heads like the Hunch Back of Notre Dame. We, quite literally, carry our problems and upset on our backs. Just drop your shoulders down a bit, relaxing at your sides. Feel the weight of the world lift. How much lighter and younger do you feel?

Feel your chest fill and diaphragm expand with each rhythmic breath. Smile as you breathe. Meditation is not a labor or a torture. There is an accordion-like hollowness and filling with each breath. Sense the natural flow of air entering through your nose, flowing down coolly, tickling past your throat. Feel the freshness of air circulating into your lungs. As you breathe, sense your heart beating, its delicate drumming pulse. Have you been clenching and squeezing in your heart and chest area? Feel what a difference it makes to relax and breathe gently. If you are quiet and still enough you can even feel your blood circulating throughout your veins in your body.

Our stomachs and abdominal areas are often churning vats of acid, volcano-like with lava (anger, tension, doubts and worry are the culprits). The stomach flip-flops with nervousness, while our abdominal walls are tight and hard, causing our breathing to be labored. All this happens without our being aware of it. Just breathe naturally, smiling, aware. Relax and release. Feel how you've been emotionally charged and clinging, or maybe angry, and how this has translated to nervous energy and heavy breathing. Our system recoils and becomes rigid with upset.

Now feel, too, the difference after this body scan, how relaxed and how much more at ease your body and thoughts have become. Allow yourself to truly relax, perhaps for the first time in years if not the first time in your life. Know that not everything in your life is problem filled or an upset. Nor do we have to be on the go every moment, filled with activity and bustle. Genuinely feel what it's like to unwind. Let go and have this moment of pause. Be at peace in your life. Now your body and your thoughts feel lighter and at ease. Even if only just a little bit, you've touched base with tranquility.

In this quiet environment of sitting, continue breathing mindfully. Think and repeat softly, "here...now". Breathe in "here"—breathe out "now". Here...now. Here...now. Here...now. Feel what it's like to be truly in the present, in the moment and with your surroundings in the here and now. So often we are caught up in reliving the past: I shouldn't have done this or why did that have to happen? If only things were different. Or we race off into the future: I'll need to get or do such and such or give so and so a call. We're rehashing or reliving the past, or searching the future like gypsies with crystal balls. Sense as you breathe in the here and now. What is it like to let those busy thoughts just drift away, slip away? It's all habit energy flurrying about. Smile at it, aware. Be steady in the present moment. There's nothing to do, to be or become. Sense how much lighter you feel without the worrying, the plotting and the looking back. Because of all our fearful or hateful carrying on, we use an exhaustive amount

of energy. Feel how all your mental activity translates to your body and agitated nervous system and notice now what it's like to be calm for once in your life.

Having connected with the present, the here and now, focus on the simple activity of breathing. Breathe in and breathe out. In...out. In...out. In...out. Sense and feel how no two breaths are the same. Some are deep and heavy, others are short and gentle. Feel the rhythms of the breath and how they flow through your body.

Entering a deeper meditation, we can truly begin to understand that not all is suffering, problems or pain. With each breath feel spaciousness and an opening. Sense how you get consumed and target a thought or emotion and want to clench and squeeze on to it or push away. Here in meditation, and in a gradual and sustained practice, sense and know that you don't have to be dominated, run over or ruled by your habits and impulses. Calming your breathing in and out, focusing, you touch base and are actually welcoming and accepting. You're open and not knotted up; flowing, not restricted; receiving, not reserved. Feel what it's like for your mind to expand and rest in spaciousness. Feel that all too high volume of mental activity drop. Feel calm, feel free, feel at ease.

Now breathe in settled, breathe out quiet. Breathe in settled, breathe out quiet. Settled...quiet. Settled...quiet. Settled...quiet. Feel what it's like to reside in this moment of actual settling and quiet. There might be fear of the unknown, the strangeness and the newness of meditation. Allow yourself to make contact with the settling and quiet of the moment. What you are feeling is peace and settling that you may have never experienced before in your life. Make contact with the ease and calm of the moment.

Know the "nothingness" of just being at ease and at peace, and feel how you've opened up and let go. Settled...quiet. Settled...quiet. Settled...quiet. You've been caught in a race fueled by your own wants, fears, habits and impulses, likes and dislikes. With this settling and quiet break, we touch base with the Middle Way of not always having to act and react to everything that comes our way. We can dwell in acceptance, without having to wage war, become unnerved, or give in to any situation or person, just the moment as the moment is. Settled...quiet. Settled...quiet. Settled...quiet.

Breathe in awake and breathe out aware. In awake and out aware. Awake...aware. Awake...aware. Awake...aware. Allow yourself to know well-being. Feel patience within yourself. Smile gently. Feel kindness and well-being. Know the happiness of your body and thoughts, peace of body and mind. Sense the difference from when you first sat down to where you are now. Here you are awake and aware, in the present. Feel the spaciousness and openness that surrounds you. Note what it's like to be "without being", to rest and let all those habit energies run off on their own. Sense peace within yourself and smile. Go ahead and smile softly, a smile of awareness. You deserve this. Truly. Gentleness, understanding—how beneficial.

Be awake and aware of what it's like not to struggle or be in conflict. You deserve peace. You can be at peace. This is really you and not a miracle. This is not happening to someone else. Be awake...aware. You can be free of turmoil and the continual surge, bordering on rage, to fall into or try to escape from things. Find the Middle Way, within yourself, of acceptance and equanimity; joy and serenity in the midst

of torment and difficulties. You have touched base with a larger and perhaps new aspect of yourself. You are also aware of the serenity as well as the turmoil in your life. Awake...aware. Awake....aware. Awake...aware.

Now you are able to offer yourself a moment of kindness and goodwill: May I know well-being in my life. I can be happy. Why shouldn't I be? May I have patience for myself as well as for others. I understand that I can get busy and caught up in work. I will try harder to catch myself and come back to the present moment. I will smile to myself. As long as I can smile, I know where I am and what I am doing. May I be kinder, more generous and open with myself and with others?

Finishing up your meditation, return slowly to your original breathing and your surroundings in the here and now, the present moment. Smile and feel your body; be in touch with your surroundings. When you smile, you're aware and in the present. Note the difference between the beginning and the end of your meditation. What anxiety and doubts have you? Where did that anger go? Don't just snap out of your meditation only to automatically resume your hectic life. Bring that mindfulness and awareness of thought and body with you to everything you do; to all of your life. Don't leave all of your awareness, good intentions and mindfulness sitting on the cushion!

In the future, as you meditate, thoughts and feelings will come and go, habit energies will drift in and out. Impatience as well as doubts and frustration may certainly arise. Perhaps even anger or fear may come into play. But this sitting practice, this pause of peace, isn't about engaging in a war with yourself, or belittling and whipping yourself. Neither is it about passing verdicts. Meditation depends upon opening and letting go to whatever degree you can. Release your struggles and impatience. Meditation will enlighten your life. Know that you are more than just longstanding habits and impulses to blindly act and react to situations, people or events. You are more than the proverbial dog chasing its tail. A deeper and gradual understanding and awakening does emerge. The Middle Way exists between liking and disliking, joy and anger, wanting and needing, peace and fear. It is a settling option.

Meditation is not just about time on a cushion by oneself. It is about translating this stillness and peace to every aspect of your life. Begin to gradually bring more and more awareness into your everyday life. Feel the urges and all the liking and disliking that take place. Try to touch base with the calm that is in each and every moment. With practice and honest intention, you will find improvement and balance and understanding in your life. Compassion will come, as well. Soon you will find yourself more conscious of your breathing. This will naturally bring calm to your body and thoughts. This is the Middle Way. This is awakening.

Smile the Buddha's smile.

An "enemy" of meditation is sleep or drowsiness. As your body relaxes, the temptation to nod off is strong. You can meditate with your eyes open, staring down at a spot on the floor (light acts as a stimulus to keep you awake). Get up and take a short walk to elevate your energy. However, your body may very well be telling you that it needs a short nap so, go ahead and rest. But don't give in. There will be numerous distractions and temptations trying to pull you away from meditation. Consider everything as a part of your spiritual practice, including the down times. We are able to learn from everything and apply everything to our awakening.

WALKING MEDITATION

Formal sitting meditation has an important place in a spiritual practice. Just as beneficial, nurturing, calming and healing are walking and eating meditation. In a 15 to 20 minute walking meditation session find an open path, park setting or back yard. You can also meditate in your apartment, house, or in a quiet hallway. Walk a short, straight distance between 15 to 20 yards.

As in sitting meditation, while walking, you sense and feel the setting and surroundings. Breathing in a few deep, fresh breaths helps to center and stabilize you in the present moment. Begin to walk in your normal pace or perhaps a step slower than normal. Here you feel what it's like to truly walk; to walk without a destination or without a concept of time limitations. You aren't a soldier marching in the Foreign Legion. There is no departure or arrival, no being or becoming. This is a peaceful pause from your normal business, habits and impulses.

Focus, looking slightly downward at a spot in front of you (looking ahead or about can lead to many distractions and day dreaming). Look ahead for a moment before you take your first step. Take the time to think. Call on the step as a thought-command first. Then take your actual first step. Feel and sense the command for movement and how the translation to the leg and foot becomes real. Be aware of the muscled, biochemical reaction; how the leg twitches ever so delicately and all the motion involved in taking an actual step: the buttocks muscles drawing up, hamstring and quadriceps tensing, calf muscle arching, toes curling to help lift the foot. Notice the transfer of weight and balance in the footwork. You will feel like a living incarnation of a beautiful Leonardo Da Vinci anatomy sketch.

When walking be aware of the physical effort involved in walking and taking each step. Arm motion comes into play, abdominal muscles will tense and let go. As you walk, be mindful that you are breathing! There is a marvelous synchronization involved in taking just one step. Try and feel the whole ballet of movement that takes you along. Once you reach the end of your path, don't automatically turn around. Feel the placement of each foot, the twisting motion of the body and the shift of body weight. Let yourself feel what it's like to walk in awareness and without any time restraints, without habits and impulses to urge you along.

Be open to your body language and your corresponding thoughts. Impatience may arise as well as doubts, fears, anger and frustration. Be aware of what it is like to be carrying all this excess, tumultuous baggage. How does it harm you? Feel the tensing and cramping within your body but, also, the joy and lightness as insecurities, impatience and all the other baggage of problems do dissolve and fade away. How much lighter and relaxing it is to release and let go. How soothing it is to be calm of body and mind. Smile gently.

Gathas or "mindful verses" can be an interesting addition to your walking meditation. For example, "I am feeling anger (you may substitute impatience, fear, or another feeling that you may wish to release) I release my anger." These mindful verses are repeated three times after each turn as we pause and are ready to start the longer stretch of the walking meditation. You reach the end of your path, turn around, pause, repeat the verse and walk. Other possible verses: I am here and now...I am here and now...I am here and now. May there be peace...May there be peace...May there be peace. Awake and aware, I am in the present moment...Awake and aware, I am in the present moment...Awake and aware, I am in the present moment. I breathe in fresh air and feel happiness...I breathe in fresh air and feel happiness...I breathe in fresh air and feel happiness. As you can see, you can make up your own gatha to suit your own needs, personality and practice.

Walking meditation can be practiced almost anywhere or at anytime. At work, as you travel down the hall to another office or back and forth to the water cooler; in the shopping mall or while in the grocery store—wherever and whenever you walk. Remember to feel what it is like to truly breathe as you're walking, and the joy that comes from being aware, letting go and releasing all your long-standing habits and impulses. Be open and flowing rather than blocked, restricted and attached.

EATING MEDITATION

Eating meditation is another valuable opportunity to practice, making contact with the present and letting go of our habits and impulses. When was the last time you ate a meal from beginning to end in silence; aware of the food in front of you? Try eating at least one of your meals or snacks; not distracted by the newspaper, radio or TV. When sitting at the table, look at the food in front of you. What is it that you're going to eat? How does it smell? What color is it and what texture does it have? As you reach for the food, (and as in walking meditations), think, know and feel that your arm and hand are picking up the silverware. Feel as you cut and place it on the fork or spoon then bring it to your lips, mouth opening to accept it, tongue drawing back. Is the food warm or cold? What is the texture of the food, feeling as your tongue moves around it, and your teeth cut, bite and chew? Experience the taste of the meal; is it sweet, sour, or spicy? The food breaks down with each bite, the tongue helps to push it back and the throat muscles open and swallow. Feel what it is like to breathe as you eat. After all, you're actually alive in the present moment!

It's rewarding to show gratitude and give a blessing of thanks and acknowledgment for the food before you. Do not just devour it. This food comes from the earth and sky and from all the elements. It is the result of much hard work. I am truly grateful to all. May this food nourish my body; further my practice, understanding and compassion, with blessings for all the universe.

Thoughts of your day at work, in school or thoughts about what happened twenty years before or what you need to take care of tomorrow, will come to mind at meal time. But smile. Catch yourself wondering. Look at your meal and mindfully come back to the here and now. We can be so taken away by our habits and impulses to finish the meal that we look at the empty plate and wonder if we ever had anything to eat at all and what it was!

This helps give you insight of the role and importance of meditation as truly being a part of all of life's moments, bringing us into contact with the here and now, being mindful and in the present. It takes just a bit of effort to make meditation a regular part of our busy lives (and in fact meditation has always been there with us). The benefits are numerous and the healing, calm and peace brought about help remind you and return you to your true awakened nature, free of long standing habits and impulses.

The harmony instilled through meditation reminds us that life does not have to consist of suffering, problems and repeated painful patterns. Slowly you nurture an awareness of patience, tolerance, acceptance, understanding and compassion; first within yourself, which then goes on to translate towards all others around you. Smile and know the smile of awakening within you, of awareness and insight for yourself and for others.

LIFE PRACTICE

You aren't alone. In every major city across the United States and in all the major capitals of the world, meditation groups are meeting and practicing, giving guidance and support. A good way to find these groups is through your local library at the reference desk. Look under "Religion" in the yellow pages of your telephone directory and call the local Buddhist group near you for more information. Health food stores as well as used bookstores usually carry free local literature of a spiritual nature.

Taking breaks from your job, housework or studies is important. The rest will do you good. If possible, take a walking meditation down the block. Walk at your normal pace with a bit more concentration and focus. You don't have to be a zombie. Smile and say hello to others and then return to the concentration and meditation. There is always a quiet place for a brief sitting meditation; at the college campus, in the patio or courtyard, at the public park or in one of your rooms at home. 10 to 20 minutes of sitting meditation. Whatever time allows. You will be better because of it. With meditation, it takes a moment of initial effort to get up and to want to take the time. Tell your spouse, mate, family or friend that you need a short break to be alone. They will be understanding and supportive. Try to make some time before you rush off to work or after an especially difficult day on the job, at school or with the children. Feel how

the business of the day just lifts itself and melts away. Note all the emotional baggage and stress you tend to carry all day long with you, even to bed (after all, where do you think bad dreams come from!).

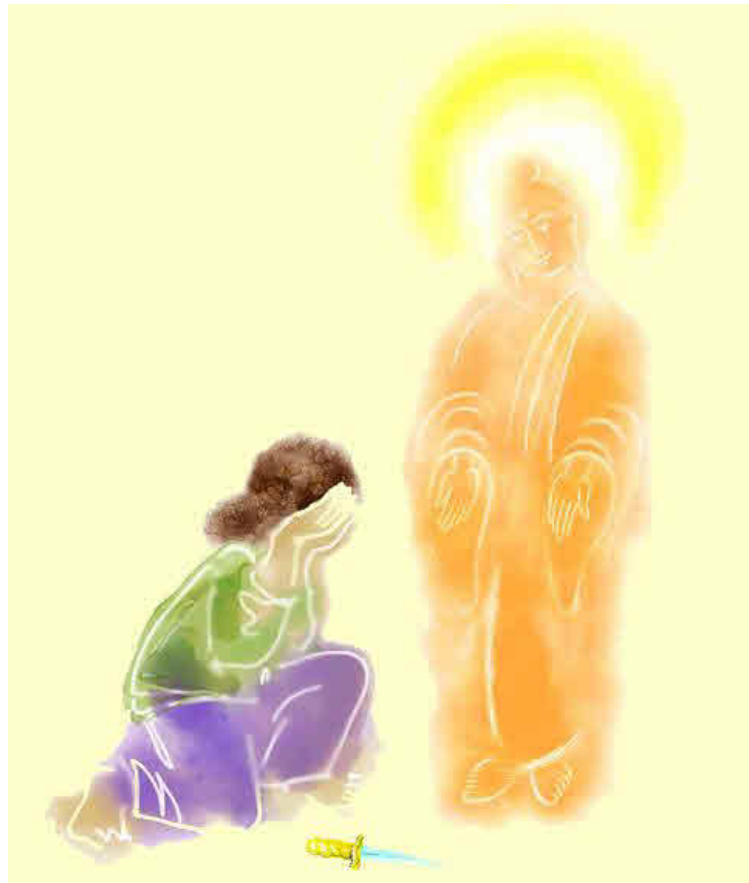
Sense what it is like to let go of all the long-standing habits and impulses you have; not to have "to be" and to actually rest for a moment. All that stressful energy and worry just melts away. You can also meditate on the commuter train, bus, or in your car pool. Meditation is a flexible practice and can be adapted to any locale or lifestyle.

You can set up a small altar with a Buddha, statue, flowers and incense to help create a nice setting for practice in your home. Seclude a corner of the house or set aside a "spiritual room". Do whatever it takes to bring energy and enthusiasm to your practice. Doing chores, answering the phone, every act is a moment of awakening, responsible for bringing you into contact with yourself, your surroundings and life. Try doing things in an easy, flowing manner. We tend to overwhelm ourselves and want to juggle and do too much at once. Try doing less, if possible, or at least do what you need to do with greater awareness. Notice how you knot up whenever anger, frustration and insecurities do arise.

Smile to yourself. Smile like the Buddha; that smile of awakening, of no fear and complete calm. Smile in awareness of the moment just as it is. When doing walking meditation, walk like a Buddha; no judgments or regrets, a gentle smile on your lips.

Feel yourself glowing with friendship and compassion.

CHAPTER THREE
LOVING-KINDNESS—
COMPASSION FOR ONE’S SELF...
COMPASSIONFOR THE WORLD



I call on you to stop! Can you not hear me, monk? Stop...Stop!"

Angulimala, the known murderer, was running, approaching the Buddha from behind. The Buddha continued walking slowly, looking straight ahead. Again, Angulimala yelled. The Buddha walked on. Breathless, Angulimala caught up to the Buddha. They stopped and looked at each other.

"I ordered you to stop." Angulimala gasped for air. He had a long knife slung to his belt. Around his neck was a garland of fingers taken from each of his murder victims. "I ordered you to stop and yet you continued."

The Buddha looked into Angulimala's eyes for a long while then spoke in an even voice. "I have stopped my running, Angulimala, have you stopped yours? Angulimala, I have stopped forever. I abstain from violence towards living beings. But you have no restraint towards things that live. This is why I have stopped running and you have not stopped running. Know that within you is mercy. You, too, have compassion."

They stared at each other. The Buddha smiled gently. Angulimala shuddered then dropped to his knees and wept at the Buddha's feet.

ANGULIMALA, THE CONVERTED MURDERER

Of all the Buddha's encounters, this is one of the most revealing. Here in this life-threatening situation, the Buddha has shared his insight, showed unconditional love and compassion, offered healing, acted without prejudice, demonstrated non-self, was without fear and dealt without harming. For the moment, these noble qualities have been listed separately to better help understand and reveal this significant encounter for all its subtleties and depth. But, in fact, there's no separation of insight, unconditional love and compassion, healing, acting without prejudice, demonstrating non-self, showing no fear, or dealing without harming. They are a whole, not divided, but the break down will prove useful.

What was the Buddha getting at by his cryptic remark, "I have stopped my running, have you stopped yours"? What running was the Buddha referring to? The running and domination of all our habits and impulses, our liking and disliking, which have conditioned our idea of self and ego, and contributed to our acting and reacting. It's the never-ending "running" within us which is the cause for all of our conflicts and struggles. The Buddha had finished with his "running" (his struggles of self and ego, habits and impulses, acting and reacting, liking and disliking) and boldly brought out to Angulimala his own habit of chasing after and getting caught up in murderous habits and impulses. Our own histories have made us victims, cornered us into acting and reacting in a never-ending cycle of blind and harmful habits. Angulimala's case is an extreme example of how we are lead by our habits. We are not as free as we think we are.

The Buddha saw through the sheer, psychological veil of self and ego and understood the anger and bitterness, not of Angulimala "the murderer", but of a man made victim from so many cruel sources: harsh parents, a limited upbringing and cultural expectations. Had the Buddha gone on to say, let alone think for a passing instant, that Angulimala was a murderer deserving punishment, or reprisal, or even looking down on him, then the murderer would have been the Buddha himself! Or for that matter, we ourselves are assassins, for thinking, perceiving and passing judgment. The Buddha, or we ourselves, would be peering through the eyes of a murderer, a murderous mentality. We would be committing murder with our impure and discriminating value judgments. Those very violent, hateful and bitter conditions we detest in Angulimala would be coming from within us.

What Angulimala did was wrong, but he was wronged into his desperate acts by many external forces and circumstances. By only offering an outlet as a murderer for continued aggression, aren't we one of the contributing elements to his down fall? This isn't about trying to make excuses for barbarous acts or forgetting the victims, but trying to bring understanding and compassion to our consciousness. Under different circumstances, conditions and influences, Angulimala would have turned out to be a gentle and responsible man.

The Buddha exemplified unconditional love and compassion. Should there be anything less, then the whole self and ego cycle would come out (habits and impulses, acting and reacting, liking and disliking perpetuating itself) and blind us with our own limitations. The selfish view of and for only ourselves, that forever separates, judges, and holds the world at arm's length in fear, is what keeps us from connecting and touching loving-kindness. Filled with long-standing prejudice and passing verdicts, self-serving motives, we clench tightly and strangle our compassion. Angulimala was accepted as he was, not for what he wasn't or for what he was lacking. This is unconditional love, having the compassion to see and understand beyond our narrow scope of judgments and to accept people for who and what they are. If you want an eye for an eye and would have Angulimala punished or executed, wouldn't you then become the violent person, the murderer? An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind, and continues a cruel cycle. The tables are turned around. Who now is the murderer?

Without prejudice, the Buddha viewed and accepted Angulimala as though he were anyone else. Who has not suffered, or been consumed and tormented by problems? Angulimala lashed back the only way he knew how—aggression, hatred and violence. He didn't know any other way. He'd never been presented with other options or peaceful outlets in his life. Take a wild dog or horse.

Biting and kicking, they're out of control. This is all they know how to be—a wild animal. Angulimala knew only anger and aggression; how to be a violent person. On this level, he was a wild man. If we wait too long, beyond the point of care, nothing can be done for dog, horse or man. In part, that's why our jails are overflowing. Many of these convicted men and women are unreachable. We have condemned them. It is easier to punish or brush aside rather than acknowledge the situation or the possibility for compassionate and peaceful means. Some people can never be helped. Most, however, can be rehabilitated with an investment of time and concern and exposure to something other than cruelty and aggression.

Take a flower. If you step on it, will it grow and blossom? The flower will try but if each day it's stepped on, it will finally wither and die. In a sense, this is what happened to Angulimala. We all start with the potential to be a flower, but somewhere along the way, we may be stepped on, abused and neglected. While a flower shrivels up and dies, a human becomes angry, bitter and, potentially, violent.

The Buddha showed no fear on two levels. He did not fear or feel threatened himself. Further, he showed that his own thoughts, actions, and intentions weren't to be feared. He wasn't presenting a threat or a reason to worry. There was no antagonist in the Buddha. What he offered was security, calm and well-being. There was no cause for fear.

There was no prejudice or judgments passed by the Buddha. No verdict of wrong or right, good or bad, no sentencing. Should he have said, "You are a horrible person, Angulimala, a murderer, and deserve what you get or to be punished", the Buddha would have been dealing again on that level of self, prejudice, categorizing, sizing up,

and putting things into an I, me, mine perspective. This selfish attitude all too easily puts things in order, but an order which is convenient only so long as it doesn't inconvenience the one doing the judging. What can we do? Do we just sit back idly? What can we offer?

The Buddha shared “non-harming”. No reprisal was going to be taken. We don't return violence for violence, seek revenge or suffering. From our thoughts and action, there will be no desire to harm or injure. This, too, is healing. Seeds of compassion and goodwill, the ease of suffering, are cultivated and offered. Our actions, from thoughts to speech to body language, are benevolent, not hating; kind, not impatient; trusting, not malicious. Can we offer something other than hostility, anger, cruelty and revenge? Is it possible to offer healing and generosity? Even on the smallest scale, can we share? Goodwill and loving-kindness may not take effect immediately (after all how many years of negative conditioning and influences has the other person received?) but day-by-day, kindness-after-kindness, sharing-after-sharing, the scales will tip and the balance of good will outweigh that of bitterness and suffering.

Here, for the first time in history, a known murderer and criminal was accepted into a spiritual practice or religious setting. However, this did not happen without repercussions. A search party was formed by King Kosala to track down Angulimala and bring him to justice (remember, they were looking for a murderer and were seeing things tainted through a murdering mentality of anger and violence). Some time later the search party encountered the Buddha and a group of monks on alms round. The Buddha saw so many armed soldiers as well as the King himself, and asked what was wrong.

“We search for the murderer, Angulimala,” the King explained.

“But suppose,” the Buddha went on to ask, “you were to see Angulimala with his head shaved, wearing the yellow robes, having left his past life and finished with killing, what then would you do?”

“I would worship him then,” said King Kosala.

The Buddha called Angulimala forward. The King and his troops stepped back to see the murderer now a monk. He was left in the Buddha's charge. But it wasn't over.

Angulimala was be beaten and bloodied by villagers still angry about his past violence. The newly ordained monk accepted the consequences without hatred or bitterness. Even the Buddha was impressed with Angulimala's dramatic turn-around and his dedication to practice. If generosity, loving-kindness and compassion could change Angulimala, couldn't understanding and benevolence transform this world's suffered and problem-filled individuals, filled with anger, bitterness and hatred? Just as a flower can't grow if it's stepped on, so too, generosity, loving-kindness and compassion are unable to thrive if we don't open ourselves to being more than what our habit and impulses limit us to be.

In a spiritual practice, sitting meditation has its place; a quiet time to ease our habits and impulses. Compassion, too, should have its place. There are countless long and great sitters, others who are good at sacrificing and denying themselves even the smallest of conveniences, others yet who fast at will, while others who can expound sutras and texts at great length...But where is compassion? Where's loving-kindness and generosity? Where is forgiveness and fellowship? Where's our understanding? Daily, there are drivers who cut us off on the freeway. Someone speaks rudely to us. Small mindedness is directed at us from a coworker. A family member or a friend's words deeply wound us. Here, then, is the challenge for greater understanding on our part and a call to compassion. Our awakening is all about compassion. It is at the heart of our spiritual journey.

GRATITUDE

A first step towards a full-embracing, understanding compassion is gratitude. Gratitude draws us into the present moment. We stop our habits and impulses to want, need, and possess as we take account and are thankful for what we have. We are grateful for our well-being of health and mind, and the goodwill shared with us by so many other people.

Can we begin by showing gratitude for everything that we already have? Can we show gratitude for our many friends and our family who care for us and help us, (despite the child-like personal conflicts that do surface from time-to-time between us)? Gratitude for having a warm meal to nourish our bodies while there are so many without? Gratitude for the clothing which warms and protects us? Gratitude for the medicine which heals us. On this basic level we all are truly fulfilled, so that anything else is a blessing. Here we smile, awakened and in touch for already being so rich and fulfilled.

We tend to focus selfishly on what can be done for us next, and not be grateful for what we already have or what's been done. After all, we do not nor could we exist alone—not even if we ran off to a cave to live. Everything we have comes from outside of us; from others, the world and universe at large! No matter how indifferently or cynically we may judge, or bitter we may have become, we share with everything else. We can't exist separately or alone. Even the hermit, alone in his cave, needs the help of nature for his roots, vegetables, water and shelter. There is no “me” alone, divorced or separated from others.

The ever-reminding present is here to draw us back to our awakened nature. We can take note and show gratitude for all of the many people who make our lives so much easier and without whom we could never get along. Our morning orange juice or the cup of coffee we drink is made available by farmers (not to mention nature earth, water, sunshine). The newspaper funnies we glance over have been made available by people working long hours at a printing press and the paperboy wrapping it up, and tossing it on our front porch. We bring in the empty garbage can thanks to the sanitation man collecting and disposing of our smelly messes. We drive off to work because of the efforts of the assembly line, the mechanic and the people maintaining the roads, not to mention all the people involved in producing the gas. The bus driver

more often than not, arrives on time and gets us to work. The copy machine technician services the machine on the blink. The school nurse tends to our feverish children. The bag boy helps with our groceries. The mail person delivers our letters, packages and unwanted bills. The gardener or roofer provide their services. The clerk helps us find that special birthday gift. We exist together, in harmony, and not as ships traveling alone in the dark.

We are all connected. We share in generosity and gratitude in all of our moments. This is the way the universe works. We must share ourselves and our knowledge to remain generous and connected. There is no other way. We live out of touch with the present moment, dealing in liking and disliking tendencies, and therein lies the problems and conflicts. Why live in a world of self imposed darkness and ignorance when understanding and awakening are here all around us? We dwell in understanding and see other people around us come to the rescue and assist each other.

We are even indebted to our worst enemy for giving us the wonderful opportunity to apply lessons in forgiveness, patience, gratitude and compassion lest we, too, become intolerant and vengeful. We ourselves are the “hidden enemy”, the enemy from within. Our ex-wives or ex-husbands; dominating father or nagging mother; friend or neighbor who hasn't returned the tool kit or books borrowed; coworker we can't stand for not getting his or her quota done; the neighbor's dog that poops out front every morning—we need to be grateful and thankful for all of the trying moments. Do not treat them with loathing, hostility, impatience or fear. Stop rejecting and pushing away. The moment is just as it should be! We accept. We smile in awareness just like the Buddha. We can be tired and yet come to understand, accept and have gratitude and compassion. Everything is a moment of practice, nothing is foreign. All the challenges presented us by so many trying people and situations are awakening opportunities.

COMPASSION FOR ONE'S SELF

Take the time to notice and see how you relate to and deal with other people. Are we compassionate and grateful, understanding to a select few whom we deem worthy? Those whom we only “like”? Are we compassionate and grateful, understanding only to those we wish to control and are trying to get something from? Are we compassionate and grateful, understanding with certain expectations or wishes in mind? We need to try and truly listen, understand the anger, the upset that swells in us (anger and upset always have a spark which is usually in the subtle form of impatience, doubt or fear). Feel how the tendency to judge as right or wrong or to have expectations come out from our initial impatience, doubt or fear. Feel how your body language and body chemistry (adrenaline and hormones) then kick in and “upgrade” or escalate our response to the situation.

One way to come to grips with anger and a short tempered nature is to slow down our normal habits and impulses, acting and reacting. Know that not everything is upset. We let ourselves too quickly get cut off and blinded with fury. Not everything is a problem. What came before the anger? Realize the Middle Way, there is an in-between all our extremes. Have you been clinging or attached to something? Just let

go and relax. You weren't always that way. Give yourself the benefit of the doubt. Don't make things one sided. Try to understand yourself. Have patience with your impatience. There are degrees of annoyance before the full volcano of anger or upset erupts. Catch yourself earlier. Understand and take note of the signs. Realize how thoughts and feelings quickly mesh and cloud our perception of the true situation. Little Johnny is tapping and carrying on, but what really is bothering us was the tough, challenging day at work. The seeds of anger and frustration were already growing. Little Johnny was innocently playing, though perhaps a little too loudly. When we aren't present and mindful, we fall into being trapped by our habits and impulses. Feel in your body how rigidity and tightness take over. Recognize the subtle signs. Before upset blinds you into fury, know it as disappointment. Tell yourself, "I'm disappointed", and catch the upset early on at the beginning stages of habits and impulses. Smile, aware that you've understood. Be happy that you're awake and managed to see through all the signs and signals of anger.

So as we feel and understand ourselves, we're also showing patience and compassion for ourselves. How can you be expected to deal compassionately with others and the world at large if you don't know or have compassion for yourself? Before we can ever move ahead in our understanding and mature along our path of spiritual awakening, there must be healing, mercy and forgiveness within our own lives. When we lash out at others, it's really anger and frustration that we're feeling for ourselves. When we dislike and even hate something or someone, these are things that we dislike and hate in ourselves.

Compassion and patience for ourselves leads us to realize when we're less than mindful and how our habits and impulses separate us. Here, we go on to pass judgments or are led to have certain expectations. "The Sweetness of the Dharma" is to be content with who we are in the moment and to show gratitude for whatever we have. We are content on this simple a level of acceptance and peace in our lives. Compassion starts on this basic seed level of acceptance and gratitude. We appreciate the moment, things and people, just as they are. The present is our awakening and place of uniting and coming to know ourselves.

KOANS OF COMPASSION

Koans are usually difficult to understand and deal with because they seem so foreign. They deal with the level of Ultimate Truth. We tend to flop around on the level of Relative or Habitual Truth, our self level. This is part of their appeal—to have no definite or easy answer. They take us out of our normal routine for categorizing and expecting.

What is the sound of one hand clapping? What did your face look like before you were born? Does a tree falling in a forest make any sound if no one is there to hear it? These are examples of koans. All are mystifying. A more direct and personal approach to koans can help us with our practice and reveal things about ourselves. Try phrases and questions which are more personal and directed toward your situation. Where's my awakened nature? Is this really the present moment? What happened to my patience? What am I holding on to? Where is the Middle Way? Why

am I carrying around all this pain, anger or jealousy? Am I showing understanding? What's really bothering me? Who is the enemy? What do I have to fear? Where did I come from? Why am I angry? Can I be happy? Where am I right now? Who am I? What's the hurry? Why am I rushing?

This line of "personal" koan is every bit as provoking as the traditional, but directed to our own situation, insecurities and entanglements. We don't need koans which cause us to be baffled, or to try for some instant, hammer-over-your-head enlightenment but, rather, koans which nurture and guide us to a deeper understanding and meaningful awakening. Being upset and pulling your hair out over the ridiculous does nothing to further understanding and compassion (actually, many times it fosters resentment and greater ego attachment and glorification through mind games!).

The ultimate and most challenging koan of all deals with love. The decisive koan to awakening is, "where's my compassion...where's my compassion"? Awakening isn't in just what we think and the conceptual, but in translating and extending it to our everyday lives. Do you have compassion once you leave the meditation cushion? A koan of compassion brings honest introspection of our insecurities, identities and our awakened potential. Traditional koans try to tear down the analytical, conceptual mind and have their place, but a koan of transformation and healing will lead to our awakened, benevolent nature.

Compassion is engaged and we heal ourselves. Our potential to be more than habitual, impulsive problem-filled beings is touched. Sharing and goodwill become the compass that direct our lives.

LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION

As with all meditations, we sit and get a feel for the moment: where we are, sensations in the body, our state of mind at the moment (busy or quiet), a quick body scan, relaxing any physical knots and releasing pressures. We breath deeply three or four times to make contact with our breathing and body in the here and now.

Before we can ever begin to share our loving-kindness, our goodwill and generosity, we must know peace within ourselves. Otherwise we really are offering a covered up and less than honest caring or compassion. The act of kindness must first begin within one and for oneself before it can ever be shared and offered to others. There needs to be healing and a rightful closure to the chapters of suffering in our lives. We each carry upset and turmoil within us and only loving-kindness can alter the course of our long-standing suffering. Begin by understanding and acknowledging your pain and torment.

I have been hurt, wounded, lied to and betrayed. Yes, it happens to everyone. I feel my sorrows and all the pain, the many let downs, rejections and shortcomings. There has been much pain, bitterness, confusion and anger over the years. But all along, what I have really been doing is hating myself and being my own worst enemy. Yes, I was lied to and betrayed but it happened, painful as it was. I see how I have been confused by holding on to all the upset and torment.

May I forgive and let go of my anger and bitterness. It has to end sometime...somehow. Otherwise I only bring further suffering to myself. I only hurt and continue wounding myself. I must forgive in order to live in peace. May there finally be acceptance and letting go for what has happened. I finally understand the torment that has been brought on to me.

I know my father neglected me. My mother was very severe with me and showed me little love. My lover or mate went on to betray me. I understand and know my deep sorrows. May I let go and release the pain. May I not torment myself. There doesn't have to be this pain, this constant war. I don't have to torment and belittle myself. I can be a friend. I can forgive. I can be at peace. Happiness and well-being can be mine, are a part of my life. May I forgive myself, too. May I forgive myself for only being human. May I be a friend to myself and show forgiveness, kindness. May I know peace. I can be at peace. I can be happy. I don't have to suffer. What happened, happened. There is no use whipping myself. Let there be forgiveness. May forgiveness and mercy enter my life. I can be happy. I don't have to fight or feed my demons. The past is the past. I don't have to relive it. What good does picking at old wounds do? There can be peace, too.

Why not? I can feel kindness. May I be happy. May I know mercy. May I release my sorrows. May there be peace. I can forgive and not be at war with myself.

Whatever hardships have been a part of my life, I accept them for what they were. I release. I forgive you all. I have clutched for too long now my bitterness and hatred. I release you, my sorrows, and feel how they melt from me. I feel much lighter and the years of gloom and sorrow lift from me. I understand my past and all the pain. Yes, there was pain but that was before, in the past. Today I can be free and release my regrets and the awesome burden of my past. I can be free from all these aching conflicts which choke me. I can be happy and at peace.

Yes, may there be peace. May there be peace. Whatever hardships have touched my life, I accept them all. I release and now forgive. Mother, father, sister, brother or lover, I pardon you. May there be forgiveness and understanding. I understand now how I have gone on to be angry and hurt other people, carrying all my hardships with me. I have been at war and hurt and brought sorrow to so many other people. I forgive myself.

Now what is left is peace and a gentle warmth of loving-kindness. I smile to be happy. I smile to know this for myself. I am not a horrible or bad person. I smile, knowing that there can be peace. I smile to know forgiveness and mercy for myself. I am not horrible, wrong or bad. I accept myself. This hurting must end. Healing, forgiveness and peace are also available to me.

May I feel patience, tolerance and acceptance for myself; the person I am with all my foibles and humanness. May I have patience for myself rather than being my own worst enemy. May I not be judgmental or self-critical. Can I understand and stop the war within and the struggling against myself and instead show tolerance, acceptance

and compassion for who I am? May I be a friend to myself and know kindness and compassion for who I am. I release and let go of my demons and torments, the anger and the upset, the bitterness I have carried for too long. I know forgiveness, feel my attachments and let go of the pain and resentment I've been hoarding and wounding myself with. I forgive myself. I am only human and try and do the best I can. This torment doesn't do me any good, but only further wounds and harms me. After all, this suffering isn't worth the suffering! I forgive and let go to the best of my ability. Here and now may I be a friend to myself, showing patience, gentleness and understanding.

May I be more acceptance rather than punishment. May I let kindness and caring into my life. May I be forgiving and may peace and compassion be fully a part of my person. Allow, for the first time in your life to know forgiveness, release the anger and doubts, the fears and misgivings you cling to. Try and feel patience, acceptance and understanding to whatever degree you are capable of, on any level, and know that tenderness and compassion are elements within you and needing nurturing.

And as a final sharing of loving-kindness, can we extend loving-kindness, well wishes, concern, and sympathy to those people who are difficult for us to deal with on a daily basis and with whom we regularly show impatience? Try relating to someone who “challenges” you and at times is hard for you to get along with. Identify with them on a deeper, basic understanding level.

I know that things haven't always been good between us. We've had some friction in the past but right now, in this moment, I hope things are going well for you and that your life is going well. I have no anger, ill will, nor do I think badly about you. I hope that your problems go on to work themselves out. May peace and happiness fill your life. I know I haven't been perfect either. I hope you can forgive me and show patience towards me in my less than perfect moments. I have come to better understand my shortcomings and myself and I hope you can, too. May we be a little more tolerant and patient with each other. Let's not hold any grudges. I understand you better after knowing my own anger and upset. I know how I can easily be made angry so I sympathize with you. Sometimes I'm not the easiest person to get along with and ask for your understanding and support. Together we can meet half way. May we have patience, may we have understanding, may we know peace, and may we be loved.

One way of establishing a deeper contact with difficult people is referring to the two of you together in the third person plural—“we”. The loving-kindness moment and the thoughts of each other are made more personal. Using “we”, no longer is the other person so distant or anonymous, but we've actually joined with them in forgiveness and healing ourselves. A shared moment of compassion opens us to other people and their personal situations.

It can be argued that when all of this has been said, done and shared, that the other person will still remain the same, just as difficult. Of what use is our meditation? In the end, we've changed and grown. How could we go back to being a bitter, angry, vindictive person—the tormented man or woman of the past? We've opened, made contact and touched compassion and peace.

Not all is suffering and anger. There's transformation and healing, too. We can never go back to harming, harboring hate, being angry or vengeful. We've stepped out from the darkness of evil, wrong doing and viciousness. Now we're awake to our habits and impulses (or at least we're trying to understand and control them), the acting and reacting, the liking and disliking. We've awakened to kindness, patience, understanding and compassion. How could we hurt, harm, wish ill or wrong another person?

Haven't we been cruel, lied, been deceitful, difficult and hateful at one time or other ourselves? Have we forgotten that we too have suffered from similar trying circumstances? We share the same frustrations, upsets, and anger. No longer is the other person separate from us but a brother and sister in the larger sense of humanity, encompassing all beings and creatures, regardless of the circumstance or situation. We offer a minimum of non-harming to any difficult person or aggressor or situation. We say no to hostility. At our best, we embrace everyone's suffering as our own and bring blessings and compassion to their torment plagued moments. Recall your own transformation and the way out! The decisive koan to awakening is, "where's my compassion?"

As you have witnessed, loving-kindness practice brings to the forefront our true humanity. All our own wrinkles and scars, as well as our most noble attributes, are known. The reason for this delicate and sensitive dialogue is to understand and bring transformation and healing to ourselves, our suffering and problems. We all have pain that needs caring and mending. As with meditation, loving-kindness isn't about keeping our pain under wraps or to make believe, fake love or pretend compassion. Loving-kindness brings us to terms with our long histories of bitterness and anger. A nurturing and open communication with ourselves and for others slowly develops. Understanding leads to compassion and compassion leads to sharing, goodwill with our neighbors, brothers and sisters of this world. We're in the present moment with our turmoil. We understand and are aware of our hardships. No longer are we covering it up or fleeing from it.

Loving-kindness shows us a positive way to deal with our suffering and problems. We come to see others as similar to us; not as distant, different, or as an enemy or a threat. Loving-kindness isn't about being blind, angelic or Mary Poppins, but opening ourselves rather than dishing out anger and blame, or throwing verbal punches and holding grudges. At each turn and encounter throughout the day, we're presented with the opportunity to put our compassion to practice and embrace our awakened nature.

Try relishing each moment as a disguised opportunity to understand our shortcomings and to shine as truly awakened beings. We smile gently with true compassion for ourselves and all others. Adding a short loving-kindness moment to your regular meditation practice opens and deepens your compassionate nature.

Some of the rewards of loving-kindness as mentioned by the Buddha are restful sleep, waking easier, being endeared to others, a sharper mind and dying unconfused.

Those rough, nagging edges to our personality will smooth and brighten to a kind, caring person.

INNER CHILD MEDITATION

Within each of us is an inner child that consists of: all of our memories and experiences of growing up and learning, all our training and conditioning; all the hugs, the kisses, the many tears shed, fears of dark rooms or spiders and, too, sometimes deep trauma. Most people have had a happy childhood. The memories of birthday parties, special visits with grandparents, weekend nature excursions made for a healthy growing-up. But there are others who haven't been as lucky. There may have been abusive or neglectful parents, loud fighting and divorce, a nightmare of sexual abuse, or just not enough love (because our parents are a product of their own internalized childhood experiences). They, too, may have been hurt, neglected or abused. We carry these early torments around with us and they seem very real. After all, these are the moments that have made and formed us. We couldn't be anything or anyone else. They make us the unique persons that we are.

So, for many, there's great pain and much torment still haunting them, which taints communication and relationships with others. But we can touch base with our anger, with the neglect, bitterness and abuse. We can bring understanding, compassion and healing to the inner child within all of us. Peace is possible.

If you can, try smiling in awareness at your inner child. A gentle, caring smile. Not to make things seem joyful or cover up any cruelty, but a smile where we acknowledge and realize our inner child in a friendly and positive way, not out of anger and hostility. This is a caring and constructive communication. You're trying to open up a dialogue. Awareness is so important because it leads us in the right direction towards peace and healing. Aware, we're able to acknowledge that we do have a deep torment or pain. We touch base with and understand how we've been warped by this suffering. How many unfortunate and consumed people are unable to admit or see their upset, and are their own worst enemy? They forever lash out at those around them. They shift that torment and pain of the inner child on to loved ones, friends, and everyone they come in contact with. Smiling in awareness, we're saying, hello, my inner child. How are you? I've come to visit and see how you are. Now's the time for us to talk.

Continue smiling gently with awareness and know understanding. I smile, understanding my inner child, knowing that I have deep wounds and emotional scars from the past. My smile is one of caring, concern for myself and my well-being. I smile because I know. I know that you're hurt, my inner child, and have pain. I've come to visit you. Now together we can understand what's made you suffer.

I'm truly sorry that you've suffered and that things haven't always been well for you. Yes, you were neglected. Yes, you were abused. The suffering was horrible all those many years. How could it have happened—to me...to me! I see all the cruelty. I see the horrible pain. There, there, my inner child. I embrace you. You're not alone. There's been a lot of heartache, but can we try to step away from it a little bit? Try and feel that not all is suffering. Look around you. Don't be scared. Not everything is bad

or hurtful. That's it. I'm here with you, my inner child. I've come as a friend. Don't be scared. I'm older now and though I still hurt, we can get to know each other and see that we're not alone. I've come back for you. I smile at you here, my little one. Come out, I'll hold your hand. Feel my warm hand in yours. You're not alone anymore.

Smile now in gentle forgiveness. I see how my past and inner child have brought me pain and suffering now in the present. I can forgive you, my past, my inner child. I know that it wasn't your fault. You were young, innocent. I see the anger I've been holding onto from vicious parents. They made me the bitter person I now am, but I can't continue this upset and rage against myself either. I'm only hurting myself. I forgive you, mother and father, for bringing me pain and suffering. I can't continue this anger and rage any longer. You're forgiven, my inner child. You did nothing wrong. It wasn't your fault. You're my hero. You've been through a lot, my inner child. You're a survivor. Now, can you forgive? Now we start trying to forgive. You don't have to be that wounded, hurting child anymore. There's forgiveness. That's a start at healing. I smile because I've come this far and know there can be peace. May there be peace. Yes, may there be peace. I'm sorry, my inner child. I'm sorry how you've suffered. Now, may there be peace. At last, peace!

Smile now through your tears, should you be crying. It's all right to cry. You're aware of the pain and trauma. You've understood the pain and trauma. You've brought healing and peace to the pain and trauma. Now go on and live in peace. Learn as memories and flash backs erupt from time-to-time. Old cruel habits and impulses may knock you down, but you can smile in awareness.

Smile a Buddha's smile. Watch how the inner child will want to fall back into its suffering ways, but now you'll smile in awareness and diffuse the hate, resentment and anger. Smiling, you know there's peace. You've touched forgiveness and love for yourself. There's more to life than pain, hardship and problems. Smile and be at peace. Smile and know peace.

WHAT IS LOVE?

Loving kindness can only lead us to go on to ask of ourselves more directly, what is true love? How does affection and caring come into play in our spiritual awakening? Love is certainly one of the most compelling elements, feelings and encounters of being human. From our birth, we crave it. We reach out for it. A mother's and father's love nourishes us. Infants without love suffer permanent emotional damage or are scarred psychologically for life. In one respect, everything we do, our relationship and experiences with others, is a call to awakening, to love or compassion. Often, love is confused with sex, or it is self-fulfilling, or even experienced as control over a mate.

Where's that magic sung about in the Oscar-Hammerstien lyric, "Some Enchanted Evening"-"Some enchanted evening you will see a stranger across a crowded room"? These encounters of dazzling romance have less to do with love and affection and more to do with wanting, craving and controlling. The next time you see someone who attracts you, honestly ask yourself why: is it because he or she fits your idea of beauty (which is part cultural and from our upbringing)? Does he or she remind us of someone or an affair from the past? Do we like his or her smile, perfume or cologne,

the clothes they're wearing? Is their voice soothing? Or on a much deeper level, have we been wounded, or haven't we received enough love? Do we crave that enchanting person to heal and fill a void and make-up for what's lacking in our own lives? These are tough questions. Should we face them head on, they can lead us towards understanding. Already, if practicing meditation on a regular basis, our habits and impulses have slowed down enough to become clearer as to why we do things, want and need, like and dislike. Now love, too, is exposed and understood.

Feel the desire to have or to be needed, and how it escalates to a driving sexual urge. We see someone. Our eye senses come into focus and go from the seeing level to a liking, and then just as quickly jump to wanting, and zoom into outright sexual craving. So we go from pleasing our senses to wanting, needing and craving, and then to perhaps even wanting to control that person we see across a crowded room.

Most people may not want to candidly go this far and find it difficult, demeaning and dissatisfying. Most would prefer to look the other way, falling in and out of relationships without understanding why. But again, everything is a part of spiritual awakening, even the lows of a break up, a nasty divorce, the fling or the short affair. Why can't I find love? What's wrong with me? Why do I always seem to attract the wrong kind of problem-filled people who turn out to be just like all the others before? Why can't I be alone for one night instead of running off with the first person that comes my way? Everyone else is married with children, what about me? What's wrong with me? Am I no good? Well, I guess I just better settle down with the next available guy/gal. What can I get out of this person? What are they going to do for me?

Until we're aware, until we understand and heal our inner fears or the childhood traumas lurking deep inside us for dependency or for someone else to fill our lonely hours, we can never come to be free from all our habits and impulses, acting and reacting, liking and disliking. But there shouldn't be anger or a tearing down. Rather, our meditation and spiritual awakening show us the shortcomings of a one-sided affair, and the transformation and healing of knowing a balanced, honest and wholesome relationship.

So often love is totally warped. We see someone then quickly go into wanting, needing, attachments, and possessing. We're lost in a fantasy of family values, our own expectations, cultural influences and a mix of guilt, lust, hopes and loneliness, not to mention anger and repression. Love (or the pretending of love!) has many disguised levels. There's Romantic Love which is a fantasy and delusion of not truly seeing things or people clearly for who and what they are. Mostly we're caught in the "fireworks show". There's Sexual Love which satisfies our urges and pleasure-seeking but remains only on this gratifying level while the overall relationship suffers or probably never existed save in bed. There's the Wounded Heart Love which calls and craves for healing from childhood needs or past break ups. And there is controlling Love to please, possess and use rather than communicate, bond and be open to whom we're involved with.

What does all this lead to, then? What does it mean? Can there be love? Does it even exist? What's left after all this dissecting, contemplating and meditating? Fortunately, more rewarding, truthful and better communicated relationships await everyone. We now understand what has driven us in the past and compelled us to run after someone. We now know the truth of our weakness and the less-than-candid-with-ourselves encounters. We're awake to honesty and sharing, nurturing wholesome values and balanced emotions. We're not out to deceive or hurt anyone.

Love comes from sharing, not possessing or controlling. Love is caring and knowing a like compassion. To love is to share in truth and acceptance. Love is drawing closer to, not judging or expecting anything but honesty. You can't make anyone love you, or force a make-believe situation. What you can do is allow yourself to be loved and be open to love. After all, we already have everything we need. Everything has been right at our fingertips. Everyone is giving just exactly what they can and are capable of in the moment. We have their love and well wishes. We are receiving and have received everything, all there was for us to know and share. In the betrayal, in the lies and masquerades, in the heartache and tears, we've received all the love that could be given at that moment. Things were just as they were supposed to be. Everything was there for us to know—the goodness, the joy, the embracing and openness, too.

Try and understand that to love and to share compassion, doesn't mean you have to go for what's between someone's legs; love on a sexual level only! But on the contrary, it means to see the other person for who and what they are. As human and unique. We can hope for their safety, well-being, freedom and enlightenment without thinking that we have to bed them and live happily ever after in knots, courtships and wedding rings. What greater love! No between-the-sheets lover could ever be so generous, noble or caring. No orgasm or climax so fulfilling as someone who wants the best for you, whether or not they're with you. More than Platonic, this is love as awareness, understanding and compassion. This is love without judgments or expectations. A love open and of goodwill.

DISCOURSE ON LOVING-KINDNESS

This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.
Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be,

Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born—
May all beings be at ease!
Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outward and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being free from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

These are the Buddha's words on loving-kindness. They impress with their straight forwardness and sincerity. Their call to awakening, understanding and compassion are compelling. Free of struggles and conflicts, here is how a good-hearted person should live. Dedicated, diligent and of honest intention. Without pretense or assumption. Happy with things as they are. Honest and simple in their demeanor. Tranquil and at ease. Understanding and aware, not vain or desiring. A person irreproachable in character and conduct, who is motivated to offer joy and security for all beings to dwell in peace. One who embraces and shares with everyone regardless of their position, circumstance or situation. May everyone reside in well-being and be free of their suffering. Without deception, anger or hatred, generous and compassionate like a mother's love for her child—unconditional, holding all beings and creatures dear. Sharing goodwill the whole world over, in all directions and on every level, he is free of animosity and rancor, without malice or wrong doing. In every moment, in every circumstance and in every encounter, regardless of the situation and without forgetfulness, we should keep this intention in mind. Here is the most noble aspiration—without judgment or discrimination, being ever generous and kind, we see clearly through our illusions. We have come to understand and be awakened. Free of the attachment to our six senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, mind), we will never again fall back into our old self habits and ego gratification.

Everything so poetically and poignantly brought out by the Buddha in the “Discourse of Loving-Kindness” is easily understandable and clear. But the last line has drawn questions and is somewhat unclear or murky. What does he mean, “is not born again into this world”? Having arrived at the deep understanding (the fondness we hold to our six sense contacts) of being more than simply impulses, no longer do we or would give rise (“birth” or “life”) to desires, attachments or to the view of ourselves as alone, individual and separate (the self is looked at in detail in “This Self That is Not a Self” section). We would dwell in great equanimity and the acceptance of things as they are, and connect to the harmony we share and that exists between everyone.

In the end, loving-kindness and compassion bring us closer to connecting and understanding with everything around us. There is no separation of good and bad, right or wrong, love or hate. All along we have been the ones who have confused things and discriminated against others and events. We've chosen, rejected and denied. We can equally accept, embrace and offer compassion and live in well-being. Ours isn't to judge or quarrel but to find the noble intention and balance (the Middle Way) of residing in peace and harmony. We need to open ourselves and not see things for what we want or expect them to be, but for what they are. We have to be careful not to fall back into our habits and impulses (judging, separating and struggling with the world), but be joyful, in the here and now. We smile in awareness when we catch ourselves drifting off and being less than kind or as we clench, filled with selfishness or anger. Understand and bring compassion to your history of struggling and conflict, all the judging and separating. May there be peace!

LIFE PRACTICE

Make a vow as you wake each day that you'll offer kindness, and generosity, share and do favors, and have patience with others. This includes yourself. Little acts like holding open a door or helping someone move a box at work, all lend to cooperation and goodwill. Keep some sweets at your desk so that people can pick at them as they go by. It might cost a bit but see how the treats do bring a smile to your coworkers. Actually, we're the rewarded ones for seeing and knowing that we've helped and cared. This is quite a prize, the reward of good intention.

Everything we do involves and is compassion linked. How we speak to people during the day and the tone we use; handing something over and how we give it, whether without caring or gently; driving and taking our time, letting another driver squeeze in, or with road rage; helping someone finish something, caring about what they're doing, or working with a bad attitude; entering or exiting a room with or without aggression; sharing what we can when we can and not always hoarding. Compassion is our method and our reward. Compassion is everything, at all times, in all moments and it applies to every situation, person and circumstance. Compassion is the measuring rod of our lives; our true gain and our salvation.

Should hateful or angry thoughts come up during the day, try offering an immediate blessing towards the situation or the person. Say to yourself, have a nice day. I won't be angry. I'll bend. May there be peace. Do anything except yield to your first

instinctive reaction to be angry and hostile. Try feeling disappointment rather than rage. Disappointment is a drop on the scale from outright anger and nastiness. Notice the difference and feel the space and capacity within yourself for gentleness and calm.

Feel what it's like to be at rest and not always in conflict and struggling. Smile with compassion, connecting with your own awareness. This is your true nature—open, forgiving and generous. Be a diplomat and hold back if you can from any hostility, abruptness, unkind words or acts. Know that you're capable of caring, gentleness and deep loving-kindness. Develop and use your compassionate side. Offer healing and transformation to the best of your ability. It might not always seem possible, but try. Gradually it will become a natural extension of your person.

Volunteer whenever possible (even if only on holidays). It's a way of renewing our ties with compassion and loving-kindness. Try the local animal shelter, the Salvation Army, the church or civic organization nearest you. Help with a food drive, clean up a park or abandoned building. Sharing, uniting, and compassion drive our world and the universe. The reward of giving and helping is like none other. To know that you've helped another being or creature in whatever way possible is the highest connecting moment for ourselves. Once there was a monk very sick with dysentery. The Buddha was surprised to find him alone. He washed, cleaned and dressed the monk then reprimanded the others for not looking after his fellow brother in the Dharma. "Whoever serves the sick and suffering, serves me," the Buddha concluded.

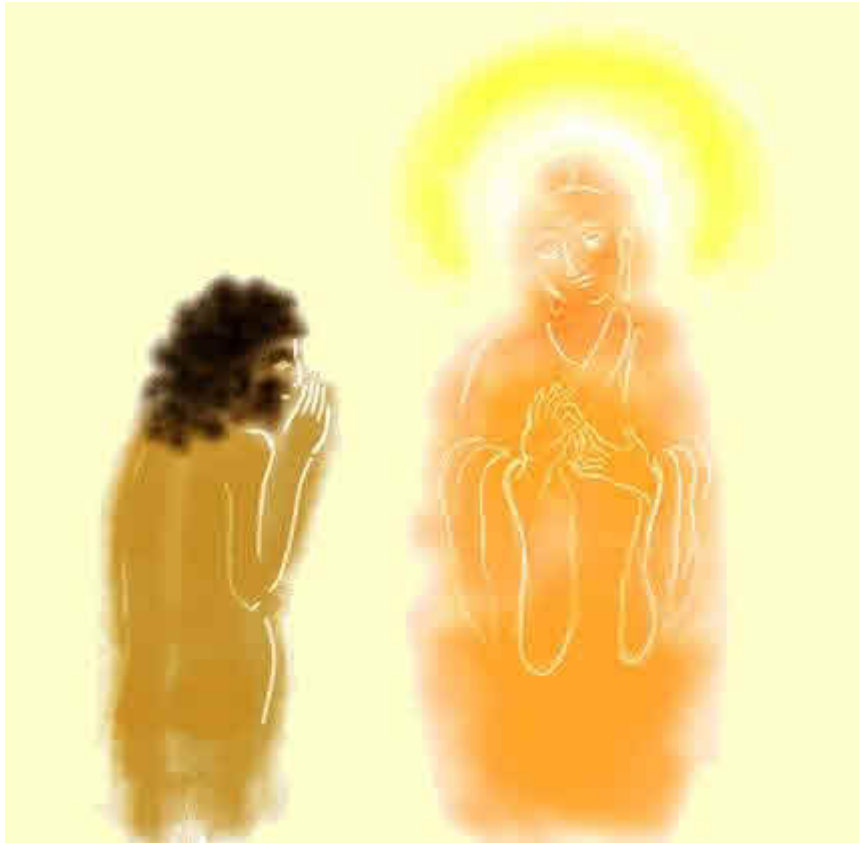
What about anger and heartache from years gone by? Yes, it's difficult to forget those episodes. To the best of our abilities, we must try and forgive. But what about something concrete and practical? Try composing a card, letter or an e-mail of truce with this person or family member. They probably have been thinking the same thing and would like to express remorse and open communication. Don't finger point or blame in your letter, but sincerely ask how they're doing. Touch on the qualities you value in them and how you miss their love and friendship. Establish a "warming" contact. Also, don't expect miracles. The other person may be greatly upset. At least you've come forward in a positive way. Show your capacity for being kind-hearted or else you'll be consumed with bitterness and rancor. "In this world hate never dispelled hate. Only love dispels hate. This is the law, ancient and inexhaustible. You too shall pass away. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?" the Buddha so aptly pointed out.

All of our efforts to share loving-kindness do pay off. Maybe not immediately or as we would like, but we've planted seeds of goodwill and they will bear fruit in their own time.

Compassion cannot be denied.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH— STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION



The naked ascetic Kassapa greeted the Buddha, then stood off to his right.

"Friend Gautama, I have heard it said you disapprove of all austerities, and censure and blame all those who lead a harsh life of self-mortification. Do they tell the truth about your dharma and what pertains to it?"

"Kassapa, there is a path," the Buddha went on to say. "There is a course of training, whereby one who has followed it will know and see for himself. What is this path and this course of training? It is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely. This is the path where by one may know and see for oneself."

In his very first sermon, throughout all his forty-five years of travelling the Northern Indian country side and sharing insight and compassion and even from his death bed, the Buddha emphasized the Middle Way between all our extremes of conflicts and struggles, the Four Noble Truths to understanding our problems, and the Noble Eightfold Path as a guide out of our problems and sufferings and towards ultimate peace. He never backed away from this message.

Meditation gets you sitting, a peaceful pause and a moment of quiet and stillness to an all-too-often hectic life. For many it's a welcomed, first time relief, bringing aware-

ness and touching base with the present moment, and uniting with their bodies and minds. But where do we go from here? How do we continue and in what direction will our spiritual journey lead us? The Buddha spoke to Kassapa from his own direct experience. He had practiced severe austerity himself, before his own awakening, and understood the futility of harsh practices. He realized eight practical guidelines that could be put to use by everyone—rich or poor, educated or illiterate, Brahmin or Untouchable...custodian or school teacher, lawyer or secretary, mother of three or bachelor.

Here is a true life practice that's intentionally direct, understandable and easily applied to our everyday life, leading to understanding and compassion. There was nothing special to do or some concocted, magic formula or ritual. The Noble Eightfold Path is a way for each one of us to connect with his or her life in the here and now, as it really is—unclouded by all our habits and impulses, acting and reacting, liking and disliking. The Noble Eightfold Path unites us with our purest nature to live in well-being and share in the well-being of all others. It's known as a "Noble Path" because it doesn't try to answer divine or eternal questions, but deals with life on an everyday basis.

In his first sermon ("Turning the Wheel of the Dharma [or Truth]), the Buddha shared his understanding: "The Noble Truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering...is the Noble Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration". And from his death bed, the Buddha spoke to Subhadda in some of his very last breaths and parting words said, "...practice the Noble Eightfold Path. Wherever the Noble Eightfold Path is practiced, joy, peace and insight are there".

The Noble Eightfold Path helps center and connect with our every day life on our journey of spiritual awakening.

RIGHT UNDERSTANDING

"And what is Right Understanding? It is the knowledge of suffering, the knowledge of the origin of suffering, the knowledge of the cessation of suffering, and the knowledge of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering. This is called Right Understanding."

Our first "understanding" is of the Four Noble Truths: realizing that we have a problem, identifying and knowing the cause of our problem, bringing a resolution to our problem, and the way leading out from our problem. On this level of realizing and identifying, Right Understanding is an all important step. We're truly awake and are a part of the present. We are aware to the source of our conflict. We may not quite yet know how to deal with the problem, solving it in a compassionate and healing way, but just being able to recognize that we're upset, pained or that things aren't going right is an all important awareness. The slow developing and maturity of Right Understanding (knowledge, wisdom, awareness, awakening) joins with all the other many factors and efforts in our spiritual awakening.

The Buddha had a reason for putting Right Understanding first. Just like a child taking his or her first steps, understanding the why and the because of something will gradually lead to awakening. It's not enough just to spout words of wisdom or sit for hours meditating, but to be able to put into action a realization and recognition and to come terms with situations as they arise in our lives. We understand our habits and impulses, our problems and frustrations. We understand our impatience, doubts, fears and anger. They're no longer foreign to us or our enemy. We have right understanding.

Thoughts and feelings crop up all day long. You can't stop them, but you can understand them. Practice isn't about living secluded but, rather, living more fully and honestly. So we can try and understand ourselves and our lives, and better manage them and the situations. Try, as anger, impatience, fear or jealousy arise, to understand these reactions. Look deeper within yourself for the source which triggers these responses to your upset. A slow, clearing awareness comes into focus—we judge and have prejudice in most all of our thoughts and for most all of our experiences. We actually have Wrong Understanding! What, me wrong? I'm not prejudiced! I'm the most honest, straightforward person I know! You're wrong! It's always the other person who doesn't understand—we think. Well, you better look again. We tend to see things only in relationship to ourselves and not for what they really are.

What's been occurring from the day that we are born, and throughout our lives, is that we've learned and been conditioned to experience and expect reality to conform to what we've been brought up to know, have learned, experienced or long for. When life experiences come up differently, we're hurt. We judge them as wrong, basing them on our own history and expectations. Consequently, we're prejudiced towards anything or anyone that's different or not part of our own limited "norm".

Developing Right Understanding, we slowly come to recognize our subtle, constant needing and struggle for life to conform to what we know and experience. Just mentally follow the impulses that arise and lead you to like, hate, fear, fight, anger, lust after and all the way up the scale. Try to understand how we've been conditioned to react in these ways.

We find that just looking at someone, we may not like them (perhaps they remind us of one of our difficult parents or a boss from a job in our past) and here we're passing judgments and showing prejudice. Someone we're attracted to conforms to a pleasant image we've learned to accept. We're impatient with a slower, thorough coworker because we have that very intolerance for ourselves. We've always been anxious in the past and insecure about our own deadlines, exams and the like. We fall in love not so much in love but to cover-up a loneliness, insecurity or weakness, or because it's commonly the "right" thing to do and jells with society's standards.

Right Understanding takes us a step closer in our overall realization and awakening. In the beginning there may be anxiety, but go at your own pace and comfort level. Let the puzzle pieces of realization come gradually together with Right Understanding

and the clarification of the Four Noble Truths. There's no hurry. Ever so slowly and easily things start to focus. You can't hurry understanding. We awaken to more and more of our experiences. You're learning to understand! You can't expect what's taken you so many years, and countless ingrained habits, to suddenly melt away. We come to know that we're fearful of the dark because of a deeper loneliness. We fall apart at rejection and handle it poorly because of the time as a teenager we suffered from acne or maybe were fat and were turned down at the school dance. Right Understanding opens the connection to our past frustrations and problems, and to our present realization and freedom. This realization is kind of like a camera ever so slowly coming into focus, more and more of the picture (of our lives) becomes clearer until we smile at our awakening and brightened understanding.

RIGHT THINKING

"And what is Right Thinking? The thought of renunciation, the thought of non ill-will, the thought of harmlessness. This is called Right Thinking."

All day long we think. Our minds hum with activity. We talk to ourselves more than anyone else. This dialogue isn't with a third party, some stranger or extra terrestrial, but with ourselves. We're not "hearing voices", but communicating and interacting with ourselves. But do we know that we're really thinking, let alone what we're thinking? This internal dialogue leads us to action and doing. In meditation we've made contact with this voice deep within us, often covering up problems, and now we can try and unite Right Understanding and Right Thought into true awakening. There's really no separation between the two, or any of the Noble EightFold Path, but a blending, harmony and synchronization of our experiences and knowledge into the present moment.

Part of our established habit of thinking is to dwell on the past by association. We pull up memories and forever fit together the present. We draw a puzzle piece from somewhere back in our past; a liking, feeling or sensation that's similar. And, too, our habits of thought jump ahead into the future and tomorrows filled with maybes and what ifs. Rarely are our thoughts of the present. Just as we focus on our breaths during meditation for stability, we need to use the present to help stabilize and bring our thoughts back to into the here and now. Our thoughts are full of idle chatter, like a fidgety child, bouncing from one stimulating situation and action to the next. Look around and ask yourself where you are. Make contact with something concrete: a physical object (building, street or a person). Look at the day—bright and sunny or overcast, cloudless or gray.

Two levels of thought occur and they're both distractions from the present—The Whining Mind and the Wandering Mind. The Whining Mind is that unhappy person inside us that's forever judging, criticizing, frustrated, angry, dissatisfied and cranky. The Whining Mind personalizes the situation, person or event from what it actually is into how it (negatively) impacts us. A tough day at the job, long lines at the supermarket, too many bills to pay, the kids carrying on or an unexpected visitor, send us into a tirade.

We struggle with and "bad-mouth" the moment, escalating tension or an inconvenience to nuclear proportions. We think, "I got stuck finishing this report, but it's not my place. Why me? It's Robinson's job. Why do I always get stuck doing it? Same thing when I was a kid. I always had to do what some body else couldn't finish, and I'm sick of it". Quickly and without noticing, we've personalized the situation and a whole, bitter scenario comes out.

The Wandering Mind usually comes when we're bored or tired. Attention slips into fantasizing and daydreaming. Most often we muse fairy tales stories or play out some wild scene, or slip into hardcore sexual delights. Daydreaming pushes aside the boredom of the job, a long meeting or the traffic commute. Sexual reverie titillates our perverse nature when bored as a pleasure outlet. Both are a way of escaping and denial of the present.

One way of dealing with our bouncing, bored thoughts or our name-calling, excuse-filled, whiny nature is to identify what we're really feeling or thinking. We recognize it and no longer are blind to or overwhelmed by our habits and impulses. Name it! A bit of humor can truly melt away tension and bring us back into the present with a joyful attitude. I see you, Anger. You can't hide from me. Look who's come to visit, if it isn't Mr. Lazy. Now take it easy there—what are you up to, Impatience? I really don't want the darn thing, Envy. You can keep it!

Whatever works is all right just as long as it draws you back into the present moment and to a free and open attitude. Smiling is useful. When we smile, we're smiling awareness. Smiling is our awakened nature. This is our greatest and most constructive tool—being awake. We show compassion and alertness for the moment. Try identifying: Smiling, I'm angry. Smiling, I feel my anger. Smiling, I'm jealous. Smiling, I feel my jealousy. Smiling, I'm annoyed. Smiling, I feel my annoyance.

A wholesome and nurturing way to deal with negative and downright evil thoughts is to offer a blessing or well wishes to ourselves, the difficult situation or to the person we hold in contempt. May I be patient. May I feel kindness. I hope you go on and have a nice day. May there be joy. Let's not be angry. May there be peace. It's a tense moment but I smile, offering goodwill. I'm happy with who I am and what I have. The moment is just as it should be. And we smile!

Right Thinking brings us out of our automatic acting and reacting, plodding in that mindless way we all-too-often have of dealing with life. Identifying and recognizing our distracted moments, we come to constructively know understanding and deal attentively in the present moment just as it is. We're free of judging and ridiculing. We're free of seesawing in and out from the past and jumping into the never-never land of the future.

The Buddha emphasized Right Thinking on three levels to cultivate our compassionate nature: First, thoughts of renouncing desire, craving, wanting or lusting after. Second, thoughts of non-ill-will or, rather, goodwill, kindness, charity and friendship. And, third, harmlessness. We try not to have hateful, evil, jealous, cruel or vengeful

thoughts pass through our minds. Try and account for your thoughts. We're all responsible for what we think. Notice how quickly we want to criticize and curse. We go around as if with a black cloud of negativity over our heads. However, with some effort and understanding, Right Thought leads us to awakening to the present and to well-being. This only goes to show how our less-than-mindful moments lead us astray and how we can be more aware. We can be generous towards ourselves, showing compassion. How rewarding and joyful to be awake to whom we are and potentially can be. Understanding our hostility, anger and bitterness is the equivalent of feeling compassion, sympathy and patience. If we know we're upset and aware of this, we are equally understanding and compassionate.

Smile, our problems are our answers!

RIGHT SPEECH

"And what is Right Speech? Refraining from lying, refraining from slander, refraining from harsh speech, refraining from frivolous speech. This is called Right Speech."

Our words, conversations, and dialogue shouldn't just fly or spurt out of our mouths. Unfortunately, that too easily happens. Words which are angry, unkind, spiteful, hurting, vindictive, cruel, sexual distasteful, or prejudiced cause upset in our lives and in the lives of others. Words cause more pain and harm than our physical actions. It's important to truly understand where our speech is taking us.

Beginning with Right Understanding, an honest realization of the present, to Right Thought and the stream of thoughts acting and reacting to the present, an instantaneous understanding of reality forms in our minds. A thought jells and is generated and speech comes out as a response, as action alive. Our language is a living testimony of who we are in the present moment. But is it Right Speech? Are we angry, desirous, bitter, joyous, truthful, lustful or sincere? Speech doesn't just happen, but percolates as a thought first in our mind. Feel how understanding, often tainted and biased, blurs reality. A thought is formed, a judgment passed and, finally, out comes speech, reflecting our whole misunderstood thinking process.

Our speech should be measured and thought out. Each word should be treasured, valuable. This is how important the Buddha saw speech. Should we have nothing nice to say, it would be better to say nothing than to hurt or criticize. Our speech should be honest and truthful, but not to the point that we need to be blunt and say everything that we're thinking. There's a fine line between being honest and hurting. If we see someone, we don't have to say how awful they're looking, tell how a hair cut doesn't fit them well, nor how we didn't like the dinner served and thus insult our host who spent hours on the meal. Our words are to be measured and doled out honestly but within reason. We use tact and care.

Humor is something necessary in life. A smile, being light-hearted, or playfulness, are sometimes useful in our stress filled, fast-paced times. But without realizing it, humor can be actually vindictive, insulting and putdowns. What's so comical about cutting

people down or using them as the butt of our jokes? This type of humor is actually a brass-knuckles, hostile attack on people. Humor that's sarcastic is an escape from responsibilities and honest communication.

If our speech is tense and worried, it's because we've impatience for a situation or for others, which then goes on to erupt into outright and hurtful speech. But really the impatience and anger is with ourselves. We've little patience for who we are, and are unsettled in uncomfortable situations. Can we bring ease and gentleness into our lives and not feel the need to rush and make quick decisions which spill over into all aspects of our lives? The final proof is our insensitive speech. Our minds are quick reacting, quick to comprehend and quick to judge and size up situations and people. Our tongues go on to lash out. We quickly say what's on our mind and feel it's our "right" as an individual to express ourselves. However, it isn't our right to hurt, insult, be unkind and verbally abuse or bring pain to another person.

We need to understand and apply the brakes to all our impulsive reacting and use, as the Buddha did, a "Noble Silence". The Buddha's "Noble Silence" was directed more to questions which had nothing to do with spiritual practice or understanding one's problems. But we, too, can use a "Noble Silence". Should we feel the urge to gossip, tell a white lie (a half truth is a lie!) or tell someone off, we need to practice harnessing these urges. We can gently and kindly learn to develop a complimenting, positive and rewarding speech. Consider it like watering seeds. Wherever you go and whomever you deal with, you're nurturing and generating benevolence and cultivating seeds of goodwill and intention in others, too, not just in yourself. You can subtly guide and steer conversations by interjecting honest and simple insight. Of what use is it to criticize? Speak up and wish the person well in their moment of difficulty and hardship.

Should gossiping at the work place be going on use "noble silence" or point out a nice quality. Should someone confront you or insult you, wish them well if it can come from you or don't say anything to escalate the situation. What good will come from it? Look at it only as a difference of opinion or a different point of view. The other person is justified in their position. Maybe you can learn something. How silly to always wave a flag and charge into battle, and be in conflict.

Wish people a nice day at the end of it all, and hold no hard feelings. Right speech also includes that inner speech or inner dialogue we have with ourselves. It's a slow process, especially after a lifetime of bad habits and conditioning. But we need to speak kindly and with care to ourselves and this includes the inner dialogue which goes on all day long within us. Be conscious of your aggressive and negative attitude towards things, situations and people.

We've been poisoning ourselves for years. You'll find it refreshing and unburdening to think wholesome thoughts, and be free of the costly and painful waste of energy from our often destructive and harmful inner speech. Listen to yourself for a recurring theme of pain and suffering. Our speech covers things up too easily. Follow the speech and try and trace it to its source. Trace the origin of the words about to form

on your lips. Not surprisingly, our speech comes from long-standing wounds and trauma.

The Buddha was clear about Right Speech: do not lie (speak the truth as long as it doesn't hurt someone else), refrain from slander (character assassination and back stabbing), refrain from harsh speech (cruel, vulgar, and obscene statements), refrain from frivolous speech (gossip and idle, nervous chatter). In the end our speech and way of communication is about truth. We don't harm or betray, talk down to, ridicule, show any animosity or speak badly about or towards anyone else. Slowly, speech can be practiced which heals and generates goodwill.

RIGHT ACTION

"And what is Right Action? Refraining from taking life, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from sexual misconduct.

This is called Right Action."

The "final act" or proof of all our awakening and spiritual practice is bringing Right Understanding, Right Thinking and Right Speech to every aspect of our lives—into Right Action. We've been made more and more aware and conscious of ourselves and others. Our awakening shows itself by our action.

We refrain from killing, but also from harming and ill-will, understanding how our thoughts and speech translate into action. We extend care, beginning with ourselves and go on to bring peace into every aspect, moment and intention and touch. Goodwill is a part of our nature, too. Our nobility has only been dormant or asleep. Right Action makes everything real. From the meditation cushion, we get up and take our intention with us out the door into the world. We have long-standing habits and impulses but, finally, we see where we're going and the other options at our disposal.

The big payoff is in not struggling or jumping into conflicts. Valuing everything, we come to embrace and acknowledge everything as an act of sharing and generosity. What may seem to be individual and isolated cases are, in fact, a sharing and coexistence with everything else. No longer are we at odds but in harmony and flow with the moment, situation and people. Our actions are understood and made compassionate.

Stealing or taking what property or article isn't ours is well understood. But try and be generous, offer what you can, and on the flip side be content with what you do have. We share to the best extent that our situation and ability allow us to. We're happy for others and content with what we have. Slowly we've been coming more and more into contact with our awakened nature and our desires come into focus, including our lustful ways. Connecting with loving-kindness, we know that not everything is love and that sex lures and provokes us into irresponsible conduct and harming. Sexual abuse is one of the most hurtful, selfish and ignorant acts because we are taken in by what seems to be alluring and beguiling. A powerful physical urge for momentary pleasure in sex leads us to do almost anything to jump in the sack. For many it's all right to

cheat on a mate just as long as the other person doesn't know, or to go from one bed and romance to the next, in denial of our insecurities. Recognize the urges and desires for what they are. They are not love, or the answer to your problems.

Child molestation continues, adults who abuse their "senior" position and coerce youths into traumatizing and life-long psychological nightmares. Pornography is only the disguised torment of unloved and confused people. Right Action makes us accountable and we look for honest and fulfilling friendships and mature intimate relationships. Abuse has nothing to do with love. Care and communication do. Awake to our thoughts, speech, habits and impulses, our action and doing is the proof of our deep understanding. Non-harming and not stealing, goodwill, generosity, and sexual responsibility, all are our challenge to unite with our awakened life.

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

"And what is Right Livelihood? Here the disciple, having given up wrong livelihood, keeps himself by right livelihood."

Most people have a strong identification with their jobs. Pride usually comes out when someone speaks about their employment and what their work entails. It's almost like an extended family, too. We have some of our deepest, long-lasting and most meaningful relationships on the job. After all, we spend more time per day with coworkers than with our own families. Friendships are created, bonds are made and emotions shared. Work gives security and balance to most people's lives.

Every job extends itself beyond its normal isolated duties and description. A school teacher is a backbone of society as they literally educate the nation and have such a lasting influence on so many lives. Who hasn't been inspired by a special teacher and guided into a meaningful direction? Doctors, nurses, firemen and paramedics literally save lives. The farmer feeds the world. A musician or any other artist brings joy to all through their creativity. A secretary in some large corporation is as important as the final product. A street cleaner helps shape and clean the world and has as much effect as a Noble Laureate. We're all indebted and should be grateful to each other for the work each of us does. What we do, how we do it and why we do it are important.

Salaries just don't account for everything, but job satisfaction, quality and integrity do. Awakening and a spiritual practice do lend themselves on the job. Not only through our daily activity and how we communicate with others, the anxiety or the laughs but, ultimately, what kind of work we do and how it affects others, even as far reaching as the whole world.

Most jobs and careers do help and serve, are productive and beneficial. A salesman of picture frames brightens up a picture hanging in a home or office. The shoe repairer gets us through the day by fixing that broken heel. The mechanic who repairs your transmission keeps you rolling from one place to the next. But what about jobs and careers which actually hurt society? It's one thing to work in a union for workers rights,

it's something else to make payoffs or get kickbacks. It's one thing to be a pharmacist, it's another to sell the drugs illegally. It's one thing to be a politician and serve your constituency well and another to get "favors" for passing convenient laws. It's one thing to work for a clothing manufacturer and another to steal and sell items on the side. Sometimes it is a thin line, but a clear one, between an honest day's work and activity that takes advantage of others, or is downright criminal.

Drug dealing not only injures the person using the drugs, who may then have to go on to steal and rob innocent people and a family home, but how does it affect that person's very own loved ones and family? Taking drugs may seem a pleasure for the "merely" recreational user, but even then shows a great misunderstanding and outright cover-up of personal problems and emotional issues. What are weekly tabloid journals dealing in but gossip, innuendo, and lies? What are television action series saying about our society which shoots to kill? Television has some wonderful programming, but where do all the scandal and talk shows lead us? What base emotions do they perpetuate, stimulate and glorify?

Pornography makes victims of young people in the skin trade (also victims of those who promote and make profits for continuing and perpetuating the sex scene) and goes on to affect marriages and personal relationships, and pollute the minds of youngsters exposed to X-rated material in magazines, videos, and now so widely available on the Internet.

Certainly, guns and weapons kill children, from the accidentally-picked-up pistol found in the home, to the murders in our public schools. Guns are used to forcibly control, and their use comes from outright fear. Dealing openly and confronting the issues and situation would be far more beneficial and healing. What of military arms deals which contribute to revolutions and military coups being so commonplace, and terrorist acts exploding internationally? How can Yugoslavia, Albania, Uganda or Cambodia, Iraq and Iran as well as extremist groups in the United States be better handled? Whatever happened to communication, diplomacy and peace-making efforts?

For most people a job well done brings satisfaction at the work place with valued coworkers, as well as personal pride. But for others, profits, outdoing the competition and generating greater numbers than last quarter leads to a victimizing of other people, and the selfish scenario only goes on and on to perpetuate itself. What we can do is first be responsible for ourselves, then to go on as a society to examine our motives, expectations and the direction we're headed in.

RIGHT EFFORT

"And what is Right Effort? Here [one] arouses his will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts his mind and strives to prevent the arising of unarisen even unwholesome mental states. He rouses his will...and strives to overcome evil unwholesome mental states that have arisen. He rouses his will...and strives to produce unarisen wholesome mental states. He rouses his will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts his mind and strives to maintain wholesome mental states that have arisen, not to let

them fade away, to bring them to greater growth, to the full perfection of development. This is called Right Effort."

What's our attitude? Are we lazy, tired or just plain bored? Are we angry or bitter? What's our intention in doing something? How are we acting and feeling as things get done? What's our motivation or intention? Right Effort is a part of our every awakened moment. We can be in one place and one place only—the present. Focusing on the little things, like what's our attitude when opening a door or driving around in traffic (many a time we bubble with impatience or anger without realizing it), helps us stay in touch with our "effort" or attitude.

What are you like when you first get up in the morning? Slow-going and moody, turning to real anger and bitterness by the time you get to work? While every day isn't a gem, or turning out the way we might have hoped for, we can still do a lot by a slight and improved change in our effort. What often happens is that we get caught in a momentary acceleration of frustration as we get out the door late for work, then into rush hour traffic, on to an extra-demanding morning on the job because someone called in sick. We're drained and edgy, and ready to crack! Trying to see each event as isolated and unique, though challenging, can put things into better perspective and help our attitude. We make the effort to be awake and aware of the little nuances disturbing us. Most times we can't change people or situations, but within ourselves we can make an effort not to be overwhelmed, and to do things kindly and be at peace.

Similar to the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha has recommended steps of identification to help deal and make Right Effort applicable and a part of our everyday lives:

To try to stop bad thoughts that have arisen;
to prevent bad thoughts from arising;
to try and develop good thoughts that haven't arisen;
to try and continue good thoughts that have arisen.

Notice that the mind wasn't mentioned, only thoughts. The difference being that the mind itself is clear and pure. It's our conditioning, habits and impulses, that make us perceive the situation as we do—or think we do!

By dealing, dwelling in, and reminding ourselves of the present moment, we can stay in touch with and go on to control our anger and our bad thoughts (hatred, envy, prejudice, doubts). At first it might seem too much of a bother to be accountable for our every awakened moment, but would you prefer to suffer the consequences of blowing your top, saying something regrettable or getting into further trouble? Right effort can and should be fun and not tedious. You can make a game or a challenge of it to sense how an evil thought arises, and smile to yourself as you do catch yourself spinning off something hostile, negative or nasty.

Smile and make contact with your awakened nature. That's it, smile. Now you're in the present. But far more justifying and rewarding than a game will be the goodwill

and compassion for yourself and for others that arises. Let's say someone's rubbed you the wrong way and you curse them to yourself. You've caught yourself in the act. Now what? Smile to yourself for being awakened and aware at this unproductive turn, but also you can offer yourself, as well as the person who's upset you, goodwill and compassion. May you go on to have a good day. Feel how the anger level drops, or at least hasn't escalated. Now carefully watch yourself for the impulse to lash out at someone or as bad intentions come up. This is practicing Right Effort! Smiling, you're awake and aware.

You have to act right away or an evil thought can quickly blind you and go on to pollute your view of things. It's not about being an optimist or struggling with the pessimist within you, but about being awake and present to the moment as it is. Consider it planting seeds of goodwill and good intention. You're not covering anything up but doing a Spring clean of sorts. You're bathing, nourishing, and rejuvenating your attitude with a more determined and joyful effort. If you still get angry, well at least you've realized it and that in itself is an accomplishment. Don't belittle yourself. What good will further anger do you or the situation?

You don't pour gas on a fire, you don't stop anger with anger. Extend patience and compassion to yourself and your life. What quickly eases the frustration of evil thoughts is a good or kind thought. Practice complimenting yourself and others. Practice stimulating good and kind thoughts. They're like offering bouquets of flowers. To nourish and generate the flowers, we have to first understand the impulses towards frustration and impatience which turn to anger, and what we can do to nurture goodwill and kindness. Sitting around and doing nothing or being lazy keeps us bogged in the same problem-filled chain of events of impatience-frustration turned to anger-hating. Only our attitude and motivation, our Right Effort can help us.

RIGHT MINDFULNESS

"And what is Right Mindfulness. Here [one] abides contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world; he abides contemplating feelings as feelings...; he abides contemplating mind as mind...; he abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects, ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. This is called Right Mindfulness."

In meditation we learned to make contact with our bodies, sense pressure areas, use relaxing techniques, as we touch base with our habit-filled, impulsive nature. Right mindfulness is simply a further extension and continuation of these practices. But now we bring them to our every awakened moment and to all our life circumstances, only more intensified. In other words, we're identifying and coming to know our habitual, impulsive, reactive self, the world around us, and how we relate and communicate through body, feelings, mind and mind objects.

The Buddha mentions, "ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world". He means applying ourselves, awake and in the present, aware of our habits and impulses, without worry, doubts and fear. There's been an

awakening in us as meditation has taken us through stilling and quieting, through the hum of mental, emotional, and physical activity. Winding down, understanding and being present is a full time job. If you're driving down the road and become distracted or take your eyes off the road, what's likely to happen? Well, the same applies to our lives. We need to be awake and aware of these sense contact points and all our moments. We need to be accountable and the Buddha gives us four key areas to focus on to help us stay in touch with the present and to become aware of how our senses, habits and reactions unite to influence us.

In Buddhism there is the pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. Identifying the moment helps ground us in the present. Body as body—feeling our hearts pumping after a work out, an upset stomach, or just sitting and taking a break. We focus, identify and relate to our physical dialogue as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. We apply Right Mindfulness, awareness to our bodies, and relate to them in the present moment of body. Feelings as feelings—we made all the green lights to work and arrived on time for a change, your grandmother passes away, it's a quiet Sunday and you just sit around all day. We focus, identify and relate to our sensations as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

We apply Right Mindfulness, awareness to sensations, and relate to them in the present moment of feelings. Mind as mind—the sudden flash of memory going on the yearly family vacation to the seaside, not looking forward to a load of work in the warehouse on Monday mornings, the idea of no one calling in sick at work for a change. We focus, identify and relate to our mind dialogue as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. We apply Right Mindfulness, awareness to our mind, and relate to it in the present moment of mind.

Mind-objects as mind-objects—looking out at a beautiful sunset, passing by a car accident and ambulance scene, or sitting on the toilet relieving ourselves. We focus, identify and relate to our mind-object dialogue as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Nothing is separate or foreign from us, hated, or distinguished as lesser or insignificant, but we are a part of it/them and it/they are a part and connected to us. We apply Right Mindfulness, awareness to our mind-objects (the focus of our attention), and relate to them in the present moment as mind-objects.

Right mindfulness is awakening to the present moment. We apply ourselves through body, feelings, mind and mind-objects to help promote awareness and understanding of our habits and impulses.

RIGHT CONCENTRATION

"And what is Right Concentration? Here [one] detached from sense-desires, detached from unwholesome mental states...thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with delight and joy. And with the subsiding of thinking and pondering, by gaining inner tranquility and oneness of mind...is without thinking and pondering, born of concentration, filled with delight and joy. And with the fading away of delight, remaining imperturbable, mindful and clearly aware, he experiences in himself the joy of

which Noble Ones say: 'Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and mindfulness'...and having given up pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. This is called Right Concentration. And that is called the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering."

Right Concentration can be seen as right attention or focusing; being equanimous and harmonious. All our efforts join in a balance and centering of emotions, feelings and well-being. Finally, we note the interplay of situations, people and our desires and habits. We see the rhythm of things as they come and go. No longer are we overwhelmed by circumstances, people and events but awake to how things have distracted and consumed us. An understanding and compassionate way of relating with ourselves, others and situations has unfolded.

Our thoughts are quiet, rested and composed. That old way of going overboard and flying off the handle (impatience or doubt overwhelming one) has given way to a wholesome attitude. We're content with things just as they are and abide in the present moment. Situations and people are less extreme; more neutral than good or bad, right or wrong, pleasure-filled or pained. There's acceptance, there's equanimity—balance and stability. Our struggling to try to fight and control the impossible, or have things a certain way, has given way to flexibility and patience. We're awakened to our life. Nothing is separate or foreign from us.

Aware of Right Concentration (focused, harmonious, balanced), we're in the present—living in the present and understanding the present. We're concentrated in the here and now, in the moment as it truly is and could be no other way. This doesn't mean we're unfeeling sterile people, but by being less distracted and centered within ourselves, we've become less argumentative and combative about making a statement or trying to get a point across. We struggle less and are not in conflict. If anything, we breathe a heavy sigh of relief, understanding and seeing who we are. We're free of all our attachments, expectations, habits and impulses.

While we may slip and fall back into old, painful patterns, we smile aware, return to our mindful ways, and get back on track. We've applied meditation to still our wandering, distracted minds. We've learned to identify our problem and how habits and impulses draw us into dissatisfying situations and relationships. Should we stumble, we come back to the present. We make contact with our body, feeling the physical turmoil sensation, go on to see where we may have been emotionally attached, and center and focus ourselves anew. We can't change people, events or history but we can dwell in an even, caring compassionate way. We're no longer lost and confused, but awake and aware, mindful and present, open and accepting. Here then is the joy of the Noble Ones: "Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and mindfulness". Understanding our suffering and problems, we're free of all our tormenting ways. Our problems have become our answers.

MORALITY, CONCENTRATION, AND WISDOM

The Noble Eightfold Path has traditionally been divided into three relationship groups. Again we're slicing up the pie and separating

things to make some important distinctions.

Morality (sila)—Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood. Morality relates to our conduct and behavior; our principles, qualities and humanity. How we speak, how we act and how we work—all are connected with our everyday activities and interaction with family, friends and coworkers. The world itself is like a family and we should relate to others this way. We are connected. What happens to one does eventually connect and happen to all others. So we're responsible for all our actions, our well-being and the well-being of others.

Concentration (samadhi)—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration. A peaceful pause from our habits and impulses, touching base with the present moment and applying ourselves diligently, this is Concentration. The focus of concentration is one of attitude and awareness. We're conscious of life's road signs and warnings, the potholes and detours. The better we know ourselves, the better we can help ourselves and relate with others. But we start with ourselves first. It all begins with awakening and being in the present moment.

Wisdom (panna)—Right Understanding and Right Thinking. This is the insight of our awakening come to maturity. We apply and learn from direct personal experience. Our lives are a spiritual journey. We are related to the world and the universe. Nothing or no one is foreign or alien to us. How we understand ourselves brings us into relation with everything around us. You can try and be an island but, in fact, we're swimming in the same sea. We are connected and only our narrow, self-limiting views and opinions keep us separated and apart. Our selfishness is the source and cause of our suffering and problems; of our struggles and conflicts. In the end, our problems serve as our answers.

LIFE PRACTICE

The Noble Eightfold Path is a wonderful guide to apply to our lives. A bumpy road slowly begins to smooth out not because we have fewer problems, or avoid our problems, but because of how we relate and see ourselves through our hardships. The Noble Eightfold Path is a true life practice.

We learn to ask questions of ourselves, and to look deeper. Our habits and impulses to go in the same old direction, to see or do things in a certain way, limit us. Can we be more open and understanding, not just to get our own way but to understand the picture as a whole? The Eightfold Path is all about being in the present moment and dealing with our lives here and now. We understand our problems and situation and seek a compassionate way of relating to ourselves. There's been enough hostility and heartache already. What's been accomplished by it? You've settled down and now you're ready to try peaceful means.

Things didn't go too well today at work, the boss came down hard on everyone. You get home and the place is a mess, and sure enough your roommates, children or spouse are just as bad. Feel how you're knotted up and are just ready to snap in two. The scream has been itching at the back of your throat all day long. But smile to

yourself because you do understand and can change the direction. You can get out of the situation without cursing at your roommate, spanking the kids, or sleeping on the sofa away from your spouse. Understanding does bring compassion to you and to others!

You've been thinking all day how you'd like to let a coworker have it for being sharp with you. But are you also catching yourself—how you exaggerate the episode to epic proportions and how it's been boiling in you? Was the situation really that bad? Or you get a traffic ticket for going through a late light. Just stop it right there. Pay the fine and be done with it. It actually ended right when the policeman closed his ticket book and went his way. Are you going to carry the anger around with you to ruin your whole day, or explode in someone else's face? Laugh at yourself a bit as you realize where your thoughts have been leading you—where you've been leading yourself! Great, now you straightened that out! On to the next dilemma! More and more you'll learn to understand and get out of those habits and impulses and discover how much easier things are if you let go and accept the moment as it is.

Realize where your speech takes you. Don't just go with your first impulse to mouth off. Take that extra brief second to sense the implications and reaction of what it is you're going to say. Give compliments throughout the day. Be sincere. Say hello to people. Express a little bit of kindness and interest. People perk up and normally are kind, too. Make each and every one of your words valuable and memorable. Be accountable for what you say. Don't have regrets or make excuses. Feel what it's like not to argue and fight. You don't have to return sharp nasty comments! Try "Noble Silence" in your life. Just let things flow over you.

You don't always have to have an opinion! Relax and smile. The final proof of who we are is in our action—to be honest, straightforward, genuine and sensitive. But Right Action is also about sharing—doing favors, extending yourself, caring and being friendly. It's about good action. Take little steps. Ask anyone if they need anything as you run off to the corner store. Or come back with a treat for a friend or a special person in your life. Let people know that you're thinking about them. Give an old friend a phone call. Write a letter. Be open and willing. Be accountable for your actions and share goodwill and loving-kindness.

Work is important, our Right Livelihood. It should be enjoyable but often it's not. We do get tied into situations just to keep up with bills. But, if possible, your job should reflect you, your personality and ability. Some people are good with their hands and make a wonderful seamstress or a handy man. Other people like words and make good writers, lawyers, or office workers. Know your strength and talents and take advantage of them. But whatever you do is important and does contribute to the well-being of society. We couldn't get along without a single one of us. Everyone is valuable. Take the time to thank the bag boy, the mail man, the cable TV person, or the operator on the phone. We're all connected.

When you do something give it your best effort, your Right Effort. Even small things count. Taking out the garbage, feeding the dog or cat, going through doors from one room to the next—are you on automatic pilot or are you aware of what you're doing and how you're doing it? When you set something down do you just toss it? Or picking something up, do you snatch? These little acts tell so much about us, reflecting anger, tension and frustration. Smile to yourself as you do catch yourself being "rough" or forgetful. Do chores, errands and favors with care and enthusiasm. It'll only make things go smoother.

Right Mindfulness is being an awakened, responsible person. Rather than just letting ourselves be easily sidetracked, we are aware of our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and bodies. We sense, feel and know on all these levels. We're awake to who we are and how we react. Things aren't happening haphazardly. Touch base with the moment around you. Where are you? What's happening? Are you tense or relaxed? Now can you act compassionately and with patience and generosity for yourself and towards others? Be mindful, be present, be aware—smile and be awakened!

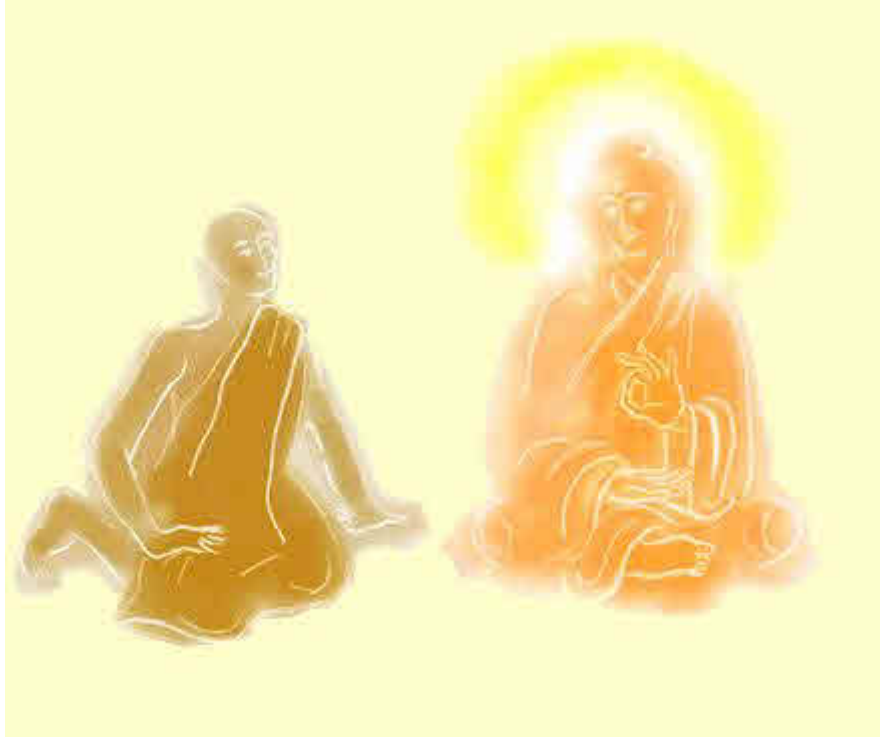
Right Concentration is the deep understanding of acceptance, of resting in the moment just as it is. Why fall apart because the washing machine's broken down again? Or you had a deadline and the part you ordered didn't arrive—what can you do? Being angry, cursing, being bitter or rude only aggravates the situation. Things may not be the best they can be, but is it the end of the world? What constructive and positive and, yes, compassionate, means can we take to bring a proper end to the situation?

We aren't brushing things under the rug, but we can only do so much and be in so many places at the same time. We're not resigning ourselves, but accepting and understanding. Something else will come up and the situation will work itself out. Be flexible and tolerant. There are many ways of doing things and many possible answers. Understand how your one-way-street-vision of things has limited you. Understand how having certain concrete expectations only traps you in a corner. Try going with the flow of things. Sometimes you meander, other times you swim up stream, other times you swim down stream. Wherever you are, you can only be in the present moment.

Be the moment as it is—be awake.

CHAPTER SIX

KARMA—RESPONSIBILITY IN ACTION



Brahmin student, Subha, approached the Buddha and asked, "Master Gautama, what is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, uninfluential and influential, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise. What is the cause and condition, Master Gautama, why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior?"

"Student," the Buddha answered, "beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior."

LIFE IS ACTION

THE WORD KARMA has become a part of our everyday language: "Oh, that was his or her karma" (as if fated) or "he deserved his Karma" (as a punishment). But karma is action, assuming personal action. Karma is taking responsibility for what we think and do. Literally, karma means action. For every thought, spoken word, and act there's a corresponding action. Things happen, but not always the way we want or with the desired outcome. We cry. We fight. We struggle, not realizing one vitally important and basic element in our lives; we are responsible for our actions. Things do not happen miraculously; like a thunder bolt from above striking us with an arbitrary wham! There are both reasons and consequences for all of our actions. Like a rippling, widening circle from a stone thrown on a smooth lake surface, the outcome and

results of everything we think and say spread out and touch others, and have an effect on the world. Unfortunately, our choices are all too often based on our blind habits and impulses.

Karma is not fate. It is more of an energy field, or an orbit you have placed yourself in. As long as you are angry about a family incident some twenty years before, or not getting promoted, or finishing second on some project, that bitterness will go on to taint your future relationships and contacts. You've remained circling in that orbit of anger, seeing only mistrust and hatred in others and, thereby, giving life to and nurturing animosity in people. The result is a circular behavior that makes us our own worst enemies. The difficulty of an event that occurred twenty years before when a mate deceived us was an isolated painful incident. But the off-shoot karma we have continued to feed has been our responsibility, our action! No, the event wasn't right, expected or desired. Here, too, the role of self and ego, habits and impulses, liking and disliking, lead us astray and into murkier waters and further troubles. Our inability to accept change or anything different has blown things out of proportion so that we mistrust and despise. Our future relationships are darkly colored.

Nor is karma a punishment, a verdict or vindictive. We would like to see some mighty justice swinging back and forth or waiting in the wings. But just as a lie compels the liar to create more elaborate lies to cover up the first lie, so too is karma remaining in the orbit of our chosen action. Should the liar ever stop his lying, then he takes himself out of that circle of deceit and places himself (his responsibility) into another sphere, hopefully truthful and in sync with reality and the moment. Taking ones self out of the orbit of hatred or a desire for vengeance will allow relationships to improve and new relationships to be positive.

Nor is Karma about being rewarded for our action. We come to reside in a less struggling, combative, ego-filled orbit. All the tussles, conflicts and power struggles end as our understanding of our habits and impulses matures. We let go and accept things as they are for their short-termed, impermanent nature. Nothing lasts forever. Usually the heartache, the theft, the loss or the lie was a momentary, though difficult and trying situation. But rather than letting it end, we remain in that orbit of suffering and attachment to the loss, the divorce, the lies or the anger which are closer to a fantasy than reality. We continue victimizing ourselves and perpetuating the karma (action) of problems and suffering.

Understand how responsibility and self-control do play a major role in our lives. We awaken to the moment and our deeper understanding guides us through the ups and downs of life. Problem-filled moments are seen on the level of self and ego, habits and impulses, liking and disliking. We learn, understand and appreciate life as offering us lessons, learning and loving. We let go with some difficulty, move on and blossom. We get close, attached and blinded by the affair, the situation or the problem. We realize we've strayed and with resolve put our good intention to work. Everything is about intention—a murderer would use a knife to kill, a doctor would use a knife to heal. One's intention makes all the difference.

There's been a life-long, dog-chasing-it's-tail-like response to our habits and impulses that keeps us tied in to the acting and reacting level. We repeat the same old dominating relationships with the same boy friends or girl friends. We recoil when intimacy gets to be too much, conditioned by past fears or heartaches. Our behavior has been deeply ingrained in us from our early experience conditioning. We stay in that acting and reacting attitude, truly unaware that unlike Pavlov's dog, we don't have to behave as the conditioned inner child. There are other directions, other possibilities. There are more wholesome orbits to choose and enter. Rather than always slamming into life, we can glide through and take personal responsibility, make decisions, and control our actions.

For many, karma has taken on a "past lives" or "future fantasy". The best way to touch base with karma is to dwell right here in the present. In the here and now, we can understand karma. Why worry about past or future lives? Doesn't this life, this present moment, contain more than you can handle and need to know (let alone worry about past incarnations or far off future scenarios)? Understanding all of our immediate habits and impulses makes us awake to the "whys" of our life.

INTENTION

Our actions become clearer, as we become aware of our habits and impulses, knowing and understanding the reasons we do things. We take control of our direction and are more able to steer through the many challenges and struggles that life offers us. We see how our intention, motivation and expectations have led us to be compromised. We may have entered relationships out of the fear of being alone, or perhaps wanting to dominate and control rather than give and let things run a more natural and open course. We feel obligated to endlessly please family and friends rather than honestly say how we feel. We end up feeling used or hurt. Watch and listen to yourself. Feel how you approach people throughout the day, and what kind of energy compels you. Feel whether you're nervous and anxious, demanding, rude, impatient or edgy? Is your intention one of self-and-ego, I-me-mine, needing attention, fulfillment, or power? What's motivating you?

Our action or karma can almost be seen playing itself out, unfolding before our eyes. With patience and understanding for ourselves, our tone and intention lend themselves not to gains, achievements, outcomes or one-up-manship, but to actual benevolence and generosity. Seeing the nature of your intention is almost like being able to forecast the weather. You know what mood you're in and can guide yourself. And then, too, you become a barometer for others. Sensing and feeling concern for others, you can use skillful means to bring peace, kindness, patience and compassion to any situation. Intention is a wonderful way of bringing our full practice and awareness not just to sitting on a meditation cushion, or to a select few, but to everyone and to every aspect of our lives.

CAUSE AND EFFECT (Dependent Origination)

During the night of his awakening, the Buddha had the deep understanding of Three True Knowledges: he saw his many past lives and how he passed from one to the next

and how each played itself out, the causes and effects leading to each; he saw how people's actions (karma) lead them into fortunate and unfortunate states; and he saw how suffering and problems came in to existence and the way out of suffering and problems. He wept to see how miserably most people and creatures lead their lives. Of course, how our self-and-ego habits and impulses lead to clinging and aversion is an important factor in all of our suffering and problems, but the Buddha understood the role and implication of action, too.

Even if you don't believe in past lives and think it a lot of nonsense, look at your own life and the many stages, roles, and turns it has taken. Look at the many different persons you have been; part sperm and egg united and become embryo, infant, child, adolescent, young man or woman, middle aged, and on to senior citizen. The Buddha went on to detail this cause and effect as Dependent Origination or Conditioned Genesis—the cause and effect of all our actions, how they're played out and lead us into open and wholesome experiences and encounters, or to narrow and limited, painful moments. For something to happen there always needs to be something else to make it happen. Things and events just don't nor can they happen alone. For a domino to fall it needs another domino.

From an ignorant act of selfishness and ego motivation comes a wildfire chain reaction of complications, leading to ongoing problems. The only way out is not just to simply stop selfishness and ego gratifying acts but to understand our desire, which burns and ruins everything in its path. On a larger scale crimes, scandals, murders, and wars all have their roots in the one-sidedness of the self and ego.

Another way of phrasing this domino effect is because of this, there is that. Something can't happen without something else happening first. A fire needs a source—always the self and ego. But it can all come to an end as long as you're not willing to feed the fire, adding your two cents of self and ego to the situation. If you don't return someone's anger and raise your voice, then you can guide the tension-filled moment in another direction. The hostility has ended and the outcome is different than if you had taken offense. The Buddha repeatedly mentioned giving "birth" and being "born" into situations. Evil and conflicts can end or not be given birth, if we make the effort to awaken to our self and ego, habits and impulses. Our action can be peaceful and positive. The end of all our struggling and conflicts is to take charge of our lives and our actions.

Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant during the later years of his life, was chastised for thinking it "quite plain to understand this Causal Law." "Contemplating" it wasn't enough but one needs to "penetrate" into the cause and effect. It's not enough just to recognize our less-than-guarded moments of desiring and getting caught in the merry-go-round of selfishness turned to sorrow. We need to go into the very heart of our misery and realize the repercussions of suffering we bring upon ourselves, the repercussions of suffering we bring upon others and how we go on to perpetuate (give birth to) suffering and to the world at large. Only then will the "great tree [of our selfish actions], be thus cut off at the roots...become nothing, become unable to sprout again in future time."

The Buddha wanted Ananda to see the big picture, look deeper, and realize that his actions affect others. The Buddha wanted Ananda to awaken to the reality that we don't exist alone and everything we do carries over to everyone else. Our actions often build until they explode in dramatic fireworks. We ignorantly wonder how it all came about. How could this be happening to us so unexpectedly? If you took the time to be responsible for your actions, you'd see how it all was sparked by a selfish, ego-filled act even if on the smallest scale. Perhaps it was an unwitting act, but nevertheless it was enough to generate embers to ignite trouble later on in our lives and the lives of others.

Angulimala, the murderer turned monk, whose story is detailed and related in the Loving-Kindness section, came to clearly understand action and the cause and effect in his own life. As a murderer he brought great suffering to his victims, their families and friends. Even though he became a monk and was able to turn his life around, he wasn't automatically absolved and let off the hook so easily. When he went on alms rounds and was seen traveling through nearby villages, Angulimala was beaten to a bloody pulp. He didn't fight or run from this. The consequences of his actions were being played out. He endured his assaults. He accepted being shunned for his past acts. For him to fight, or be in denial of his acts would only have continued the path of his previous violent actions.

Understanding action or karma needs to begin on a personal level where we have weaknesses such as problems at work or conflicts with friends or family. Our anguish goes deeper as we lash out and make others around us suffer. Suffering and problems are seen as a spark starting from a selfish, ego-filled ignorant act turned to a larger forest fire of torment and suffering. As we awaken to the responsibility of our actions, we can only be humbled and sobered. Although we will all run into problems and difficulties at some time, the realization comes that we can never justify hurting and knowingly bringing pain to someone else. Awakening to the role of habits and impulses, our self-and-ego inflamed pursuits and fears, it is seen how wars, scandals, corruption, greed, anger, bigotry and sexual abuse, all start from individual acts but go on to affect everyone, society at large, and on to the whole world. Yes, we are each other's suffering. Yes, we are each other's awakening, healing and transformation! How can we ease so many separate yet global dilemmas? We can each be responsible for our actions, never willfully harming another despite how angry or pained we might be. At the very least, we bring non-harming to the present moment. We may have been lied to, jilted, cheated, robbed or beaten, but what good would it do to lash out and continue the anger and upset? It would only further reverberate and bring pain to others, the widening circle of karma. How can it end? When does it end? Here and now in the present we share compassion.

We share forgiveness. We share healing. Yes, I may be wounded. It's not that easy to forget. But action (karma) also implies acts of goodwill and good intention. I will not strike back in a vicious, vengeful way. I will defend myself honestly with the dignity of compassion and awakening, and not be a deviled, vengeful person. No amount of vengeance can return us a murdered love one or regain our stolen goods. Inflicting

cruelty only ignites harshness and less love and on and on. Problems and suffering maim and blind the world. There are already enough victims to prove that hostility doesn't work. We need peacemakers, loving-kindness, gentleness, compassion—awakening.

Understand who you are, give up the long-standing suffering you've been toting, and let go of the elements that have nourished it. Awaken to control and better guide your torment into healing. Nourish goodwill and responsibility. Bring awakened action to the here and now. Start with forgiving yourself. Let your long-standing anger, grudges, heartache and impatience leave you. Allow kindness and goodwill to guide your actions, rather than upset and rancor, blinding and shrinking your generosity. Feel what it is like to let the weight of years of torment lift from you. Be kind to yourself, be a friend and stop any harsh judgments or guilt. Let compassion, sympathy and tenderness be your creed, inspiration and real life display of action. Let this and all seasons be one of true peace...let yours be a lifetime of compassion.

THE FIRST THOUGHT

How do we take control of our lives when they are spinning out of control? The clearest way to responsible action is first through our thoughts. The Buddha pointed out that before we can take a step, or speak a word, our thinking dictates in what direction we're going to go. Before we walk or talk, the thought comes to mind first. The surest way to sensitive, generous relationships and communication with others is in listening, and understanding our forming thoughts to be action. All our actions go on to develop from our thought patterns, and the connecting experiences of our lives are sewn together by the resulting action.

In all of our interaction with others, in our chores and our work, thought takes us from love to hate, and colors our problems in life. We could smooth out the wrinkles of our suffering with some forethought; listening to our thought turned into intention. The resulting actions would benefit everyone. Unwitting fallouts with our parents don't just happen; but they take place as our thoughts go on to trigger the actions. A tough day at work carries over on the home front. Problems, suffering and widespread misery could be filtered down to almost nothing if we all accepted responsibility for our thoughts, the direction they lead us, and the consequences turned into action.

DIRECTING KARMA

Practical as ever and grounded in the present, the Buddha gave us the Noble Eightfold Path as an example of how to shape and conduct our lives, our actions. Given full detail under its own section, the Middle Way (not getting caught up in something one way or the other) is the key while the Four Noble truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are the action to turning the key and opening our awareness as action in our lives, helping better direct our daily lives into well intended, understanding encounters. Should it be an attitude problem, we focus on Right Thoughts. Should it be a dissatisfaction with work, we look at Right Livelihood. If we are scatter brained or inattentive, Right Concentration will help. Should we be miserable and dissatisfied, we examine our Right Understanding. If we are lazy or depressed, Right Effort can motivate us. Should we be insulting or use sharp humor, Right Speech is the

benefactor. Regretted decisions or misconduct, Right Mindfulness and Right Action will help guide you the next time around. As always with the Buddha, there is hope through understand; our problems are the answer.

LIFE PRACTICE

Applying mindfulness to our six senses, we see how our senses are played upon, stimulated, then turned into action. People, moments and experiences are buzzing around us all day long like bees. We're aware, whether its sound, sight, hearing, smell, taste or thought that's communicated to us. Contact has been made. We know the sense contact as only that—sensation. A situation, conversation or encounter has been engaged. Now from here, we can be responsible for our reaction.

Try and watch yourself. See if you immediately judge the moment. Before our habits and impulses can get the better of us at this early stage, karma and good intention need to come into play. We smile, acknowledging the moment, the sense contact. If someone is angry we try and understand their anger. Or, we can determine if we have done anything to contribute to their upset, rather than get defensive and combative ourselves. We show patience, breathing deeply, and are in the moment without having to be anything special. We show goodwill and try to guide the potentially hostile situation into a peaceful direction. We don't fan the flames of anger or upset. Responsible for our action, we take a compassionate route.

After all has been said and done, we don't curse or bad mouth the person or the moment. If necessary we apologize, make peace and offer encouragement; have a good day, hope things get better, it will all work out. We allow the other person to be as they are, accepting, not judging or dealing in wrong action. We aren't contributing to the tension with our value judgments or indignation (our self and ego!). Every moment is a moment of practice, goodwill and responsible action. We've understood that we can take control of our lives, and the end result isn't a surprise but one which we have knowingly helped guide and shape. After this, what will be will be. You will actually be able to see the direction you are headed, and perhaps sidestep some unnecessary land mines and unproductive situations.

Conflicts and struggles will come. However, coming into focus before you will be their resolution, ease and acceptance. Things should not be quite as miserable or full of suffering. The awakening to the implications of pain, suffering and unhappiness in ourselves, connects us with the pain, suffering and unhappiness in others.

What we can do to understand and ease our own problems in turn will bring ease, awakening and compassion to all others.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ULTIMATE TRUTH— TAKING REFUGE IN ALL



Be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves with no other refuge. Let the Dharma be your island, let the Dharma be your refuge with no other refuge...clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world.

"...always with a mind filled with loving-kindness, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill-will. Then, with his heart filled with compassion,...with his heart filled with sympathetic joy,...with his heart filled with equanimity,...he dwells suffusing the whole world...everywhere, always with a mind filled with equanimity, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill-will.

"Here [one] by the destruction of the corruptions, enters into and abides in that corruptionless liberation of heart and liberation by wisdom which he has attained, in this very life, by his own super-knowledge and realization..

"...It is just by this building-up of wholesome states that this merit increases."

AWAKENING TO ALL

A DAILY MEDITATION PRACTICE—breathing in, breathing out. Mindful of your habits and impulses. Residing in the present. The Middle Way. The Four Noble Truths.

The Noble Eightfold Path. Impermanence. Non-self. What more? That's it! No more! I'm overwhelmed. What awakening? My head's spinning! Where have all my efforts lead me? Is there a pay off or final outcome to all my practice? There is but it's more promising and far simpler than you've imagined. There's nothing tangible like winning the door prize or hitting it rich with the winning lottery ticket. Names like nirvana or visions of Shangri-La come to mind. There must be a heaven in all this. There has got to be a paradise. Where's the rainbow at the end of it all, the pot of gold? There are no decorations, medals or commendations to be received. There is, however, awakening, stepping out of ignorance and living free of conflicts and struggles. There is taking compassion to heart as the only way of relating and dealing with others. No other way can succeed. Stop all your searching. You have everything you need. You're here already. You have arrived. Believe it, you're just fine. Just allow yourself to open up.

Our great reward is opening our lives to all things, all people, all moments. Nothing is foreign, an enemy or a stranger. There is compassion and peace for all in the here and now, including ourselves. Before, like a horse with blinders on, we saw little of what there was around us. We were frightened and stumbled. We fell and fought. We had little hope. Shrouded in ignorance and lead blindly by habits and impulses, we lashed out at the world and fought our way. We were victims of our desires; creatures of our habits. But now a deep understanding has illuminated our lives. We are much more than what our selves have lead us to believe.

Peace, ease and well-being are generated; "the dust being wiped from our eyes". Our practice is in part undoing the knots, damage and limitations placed on us by our self and ego and opening ourselves to a wider horizon. The Big Picture. While on the one hand the guidelines and practice seem like a recipe to follow, they simply point the way. Just mechanically doing them achieves nothing. Meditating and getting up to expect some magical change is a misleading practice. Reading books for the sake of reading and stuffing facts in your head only clutters up the mind with more information and concepts to untangle. Again, this is a limited practice. Attending retreats and Dharma talks is only good if you actually listen and apply the insight. Awakening, the Dharma in the first person, is to be present and mindful as we live our everyday lives. Our enlightenment is in the here and now of the moment. There is a famous analogy of pointing towards the moon and mistaking the hand and the finger as the moon. We shouldn't mistaken knowledge and knowing alone as the Ultimate Truth but, rather, deep understanding leads us to awakening come alive as direct, personal experience. It's applying knowledge in the first person to our ups and downs, our problems as answers, and knowing the moments of our life as wisdom, understanding and compassion. We have been preparing the field for harvest. First the soil must be readied and tilled. Seeds must be planted.

Nourishment given and time for natural development and insight to take place. Patience is needed. Nothing can be hurried. Wisdom and enlightenment can't be forced or pretended. And as all goes well, nice and easy, then the reward of awaken-

ing and compassion, our harvest-reward, comes when we see and know in our everyday lives the Ultimate Truth.

For so long we've dealt with moments, events, situations and people on the level of self and ego: habits and impulses, liking and disliking, acting and reacting, sense contacts overwhelmed. In conflict with ourselves and others, not truly comprehending our situation or compulsions, meditation and our good efforts have now brought a quiet understanding to us. Understanding is more than knowledge. No longer are we overwhelmed by the cause and effect of the world (or at least the anger or fear doesn't seem to last as long and is more manageable).

We have edged towards the Great Understanding. We have been awakening ever so slowly. We see how our entire lives and all its experiences have been leading us to this moment of true understanding. Our habits and impulses have eased enough for us to see clearly. As long as we separate, fear or hate, want and need, crave or despise, we will suffer. We will have problems and know pain this is certain, but as long as judgment, prejudice, anger and doubt dominate us then we perpetuate actions or a ripple-like affect of self inflicted torment. Life may now be pleasant, tolerable and manageable. But in this illusion of happiness, we are subtly contributing and perpetuating a win-loose situation. We will always remain in self-guarded, self-dominated upset and agitation.

Feel and know, feel and know now in the moment, in the present. After all your efforts, the cross legged sitting, knees hurting or the small of your back in spasms; after all the Dharma talks, 10 day retreats in complete silence, the countless books piled up (some of which you have never even opened the cover!), the Dharma tapes bought and the many lectures you've attended and have immediately forgotten what was said; feel and know, feel and know now in every fiber of your being, in every dividing cell held within the fine skin of your body, that this spiritual practice, your awakening is in the here and now. In every encounter and situation, you are connect with the Ultimate Truth and not just when you sit on a cushion, chant or while on retreat. Wherever you go, here you are!

We take refuge in all, the pleasant, the unpleasant, and the neutral. We reside in harmony and equanimity with all. Here we are completely open and accepting, receiving and giving at the same time. Compassion is not only reserved for the truly needy or deserving but for all (including ourselves!) regardless of the shortcomings or the circumstances. We don't side step anything or anyone in our practice but welcome all. In the very least we provide non-harming and if we can, transformation and healing. Feel and know how the mind categorizes and how all our culture, society, families and friends and all their great expectations, have come to form this self and ego identity we think we are. Feel and know how you act and react. Without becoming indulgent, fearful or separating, we can understand and not be overwhelmed by habits and impulses. Care is given. Concern is shown.

Words of encouragement and peace are offered. Smile like a Buddha, the Buddha of awakening within all of us. Feel and know patience, understanding and let compassion come alive in you. Feel and know the Ultimate Truth and Full Awakening. Free of self and ego, cravings, fears, desires, separation, know every moment and every encounter as a potential for sharing, embracing and dwelling in the Ultimate Truth rather than suffocating in the anguish of self and ego. Realize how your self and ego identity have made the moment to be "great, horrible or dull". And, in fact, the moment is just as it should be and that this is all right, too. Dwell in being as is and not in judging, separating or craving.

Should we receive news of a death, we understand the grand metamorphosis taking place and wish them well on their journey. We are beholden for the joy known and shared. We mourn the passing away of a dear friend or family member but celebrate the Ultimate Truth shared and touched by all. The entire universe flows through us and makes us richer. Should we be attacked or criticized at the work place or during the day, we don't automatically crawl into a shell and go into a defensive mode or strike back out of fear and flee, or hold a personal vendetta. We feel the situation of how normally the urge to act and react would have taken us over but now we understand and offer non-harming and our good intentions. Calmly and politely, we express ourselves and try to understand and reassure, rather than threaten and be combative. We let go, not clinging to anger or falling to pieces in upset.

Should nothing be happening, a quiet moment alone and free, or a person or an event that bores us, we don't judge or reject but take the situation or the person for what they are. Haven't we been a bore or self indulgent, too? We don't have to be "on" all the time nor always craving for excitement or stimulation. There is nothing wrong with stillness. Otherwise we would be giving birth to desire and wanting. We reside in the quiet or lull of the moment. We feel and know the spaciousness of the situation. Feel the vastness there is in the moment and to everything as soon as our self and ego are dropped.

ORDINARY JOY

Most of our lives and the situations that play into and make them up are what could be called "ordinary", just middle of the road or downright dull. The alarm clock goes off. We stretch, rub our eyes, lay in bed a few minutes longer, take a deep breath and then sigh as we take the first step of the day. After groping for our slippers somewhere back under the bed, we yawn and make our way to the bathroom and look into the mirror, sticking our tongues out and flatten our disheveled hair. We splash water on our faces and quickly brush our teeth. We shower then dress. We pour milk and eat some cereal. Once outside, we grab the morning newspaper, run back into the house to get a jacket for the morning cold, then back outside to gun the car engine or walk down the street to catch the bus. We sit in traffic listening to the radio blare the weather report or on the bus or subway to stare straight ahead. We shuffle and march in line up to the office and plop down at our desks and stare at the computer.

Our days are filled with shuffling paper, opening drawers, going in and out of rooms, smiling half smiles, twisting and turning, bathroom visits, taking breaks, snacking and

chewing, brushing teeth, or at home in meal preparations, chopping-mixing-stirring. We finally flop onto the sofa, take a deep breath and sit quietly for a moment. All of these little episodes are common and ordinary. Nothing too memorable one way or another. But in the Ultimate Truth, they are deep moments of practice and mindfulness. Mindfully, we feel the spaciousness, and know what it is like not to be busy and the freedom there is within the situation without a self coming to stir things up. We note the ordinary and sense the difference as situations change. Take time to be present and connect with the ordinary. Don't dismiss or ignore it. Practice is available in the here and now. Things are just as they should be. Dwell in the now of the moment—all moments. Know the moment as it is and for what it is. Slowing down just a bit from your knee-jerked, habitual ways will help you touch base with the ordinary. Smile and wholeheartedly accept the ordinary and the normal of your life.

SHARED UNITY

From space the earth looks like a cloud-streamed, bright blue sphere. There are no boundaries of countries (despite the fact that the great wall of China can be seen!). There is no Mexico, Greenland, Italy, Africa, or Saudi Arabia. National flags, frontiers and territories mean nothing. Filled with so much self and ego, habits and impulses, insecurity and possessiveness, we have cut up, divided and separated. When the moon was discovered, a U.S. flag was quickly stuck on it. Columbus claimed the New World for Spain. France went on to grab up Indochina. Ownership, separating and conquering are all part of self and ego motivation.

Through us flows the earth. Through us flows the universe. We are part of the grand being of Shared Unity. Needing everyone and everything in their place, there is balance, harmony and peace. The next time you drink a glass of water look at its course. The water comes from pregnant clouds soaring above. The clouds gather in mountains to snow or rain. There's a runoff downhill via long natural aqueducts of streams, brooks and rivers. Then through the effort of countless engineers and workers, water is damned and purified, and reaches us through an elaborate, pipeline effort. Water flows out of a faucet and pours to fill our glass. There is connection to everything. There is Shared Unity.

Look, too, at a lake or the ocean. What do you see? A great body of water? Look again. It is taken for granted that water is just one vast body. Look again. The water you see is really so many billions of droplets. It took all the Shared Unity of every single one of them to be for that moment an ocean or lake. Everything combined and shared in being.

Yellow, moist, and sweet—a kernel of corn. Do you see the water from clouds and the rivers which have nourished it? Do you see the earth where the corn has grown and how the elements and minerals feed it, the sun providing heat and energy for the body of photosynthesis? Do you see the tilling of the soil and the final harvest by the farmer? The truck driver bringing the bushels of corn to market, the produce person setting it out for purchase? Finally, as we eat the corn and smile at the succulent tender kernels, it took all the fruition of the universe together to make the corn

available to be a corn moment. Even that which is not corn contributes to the corn being corn. Everything pulses in importance.

The Elizabethans thought of the world as a Great Chain of Being, showing how everything linked and moved upwards from the lowest to the highest, to King and God. But imagine this chain of being running horizontally, left to right, without a beginning or an end. Each link is individual (earth, plant, animal, human, gas, star) but also dependent and connected on the same level of being and sharing. They are irrevocably joined as Shared Unity. Each and every one thing is dependent and needy of the other to be and is nurtured by all the other links of life in the great scheme of things. Each link corresponds and is intimate, integrated and involved with the next. We are a part of the others existence and relate to the well-being of one's self and the well-being of all others. There is sensitivity, communication and compassion in all our connections. It can't be avoided. This is the way of the universe—Shared Unity. This is the Dharma (there is change and sharing, something our egos don't like). Empowered and sustained by all, nourished by everything around us, we are in our current body for the moment, then go on to connect and share with everything else in return. This is how the universe and our own imagined isolated little world works—Shared Unity.

You might be skeptical about all the change and sharing, still clinging to your self and ego, but realize the changes in your own body: sperm and egg joining, embryo to infant to adolescent to middle aged, to senior citizen. Look deeply. Know the many, many people you have already been, nourished by so many sources. Know the many lives you have already lived. Know the many lives you have shared.

In the section on Self it was alluded at who we really are. In part a fusion of the most distant stars, the elements of earth, air, water and heat have energized and combined to form as a unique human melding. We are not just the child of our mother and father but made-up of suns and galaxies which course through our veins and exist in our every heartbeat. We are more than self and ego, habits and impulses. We are earth and mineral, sea and sky—touched by everything.

In the Ultimate Truth we understand how we share with and are connected with everything. We are united, connected and collected. Our problems, struggles and dilemmas come from our thinking and wanting to be separate and individual. The phantom of self and ego wanting permanence and security rears its head as desires, judgments and separation.

Realize the universe and this earth flow through you at all moments. Within us is the earth of solid forms and skeleton, air as lung capacity and spaciousness, water as moisture and liquids, and heat as the energy giving life connection and growth. It has taken all the forces of nature to combine as Shared Unity to make what seems on the surface to be an individual. You only have to look beyond the limits of self and ego.

Our Great Understanding illuminates the scope and dimensions of how vast all life really is. As in our own physical body and growth, our enlightenment has started at a seed level. It grows, is nourished and matures. All our efforts, contacts and experienc-

es, bring us to the deeper connection of Shared Unity. We have gone beyond identifying with our body. We are more than self and ego limiting sense contacts. We have gone from self and ego grasping and aversion, liking and disliking, to acceptance, welcoming, openness and taking refuge in all (connected and sharing). We can no longer hide behind the masquerade of I, me, mine but dwell in harmony with each and every situation as being a part of our well-being and related to us. The pain and suffering of others does touch and flow through us. So, too, does the joy and elation. We reside in the moment without discriminating or placing value judgments. Practice is found in the ordinary, too. Everything is part of the flowing whole. We understand and accept. We understand and let go. We understand and share. Understood is the personal moment-by-moment experience of this body form we know as human life, and of all life-generating elements, cycles and rhythms of the universe.

Should one element be left out, the entire universe collapses. Everything is valued. Nothing can be dismissed. Nothing is less or inferior. Perhaps you can get by with losing one molecule but see how much more difficult it is. Lose another molecule and things begin to unravel. Take them for granted and see how the universe comes apart. All the elements of the universe join as interconnected bodies (whether as a sun, an earth, a tree, an insect or a person) and rely on everything outside from their form to make them what they are. All the swirling galaxies, contribute to the harmony and flow of Shared Unity that exists between us. You could get by with the loss of one finger or maybe two, but lose a hand and see how much more difficult things would be for you. Cut down a tree and not much happens. But clear forest after forest and our planet shrivels up. Pollute a stream, and your water supply could very well next be contaminated. Smog in the sky is also in our lungs and our children's lungs. It all adds up. Everything matters. We are joined together.

Take away one element from the universe and the universe is made the less. The furthest reaches of the cosmos have as much to do with who and what we are and our present moment and understanding as our immediate reality of going to work, our parents and our friends. Like a tide surge, all the universe reaches, pressures and influences this bright blue world of ours. We share in the "common"; in the same changing life cycle. On the one level there is "birth and death" but in the Ultimate Truth, we are united and sharing. There is no separate or individual self alone and by itself. We are plural and made of many plurals which stand, connected and joined together. Everything is an influence and contributes to the well-being and livelihood of everything else. As much as we may resist, the universal family of change and sharing imposes its will upon us to return, share and give of ourselves and join in Shared Unity, to put an end of our self and ego separating concepts and cravings.

We return to our Divine Abiding with the realization of more important deadlines and contributions than what our next car is going to be or what hairstyle to next model. Finally, we are finished with all the I, me, mine issues. Done is what had to be done. Released and welcoming, we rejoice in our part of Shared Unity and contribute to the continued betterment between everything.

The universe simply flips and flops in a continuous present of now change and now regeneration. A now expression, a now blending, a now weaving, a now expanding, a now, epic-proportioned tale has everything coming to play an important role of cooperation.

THE METAMORPHOSIS

One of the most difficult moments in a person's life is the thought of their upcoming death. There is fear of the unknown and letting go of everything around one which is held so dearly. We are uncertain what the next big step is going to be. What really is it that is supposed to happen next? What we do know (or really would like) is that we could hold on desperately to this life, to who we think we are, and to the world just as we make believe is around us. Our biological clock has run down to its last precious years. We are angry and resentful of others who have hurt us and, too, regret the times that have not gone the way we planned. There are desires unfulfilled. We never made it to Paris or to tour the Greek Isles. The kids and work kept us busy. Suddenly there are gray hairs on our head, wrinkles in the corner of our eyes, extra pounds around our waist and our step is considerably slower. How could this have all of a sudden happened to me? To me! Other people get old, not me! Now there's a bald spot and you wear glasses. This can't be. You comb your hair to hide the balding or color your hair some unnatural color. Diets are tried but never seem to work. A little nip and tuck surgery is contemplated. We want to be immortal. I'll be the first. There always has to be a first.

Suddenly it hits hard when our own parents die. It is shocking and painful to lose a cherished loved one, and even more shocking and painful to lose our parents because as their children, we always looked up to them. They were always bigger than life and indestructible. They brought you up and gave you wonderful qualities, manners and honesty. They were there for you in times of sickness and heartache. They provided for you and always wanted the best for you, doing the best that they could. They were good role models. Perhaps a house painter, an insurance salesman, a nurse or a secretary. He played golf on the weekends and she sewed and made her own clothes. They were both these things and so much more.

On the one hand your father or mother may be gone and are no longer with you. On the other hand they have never left and are always near at hand, but in a different way than you are use to. If you are quiet and still enough you will see them everywhere. Now if you look around you, quiet and still enough to understand, there is a beautiful and subtle metamorphosis to the universe. We are all a part of the Shared Unity of things. Everything is always giving and sharing of itself. There is nothing to fear as we move forward and join with our "greater" family, the sharing with everything around us. In a near miraculous way, it has taken so many elements and forces of the universe to come together to give you your parents: all the endless swirling rivers and seas, the vast forests and deserts, the warmth of countless suns, all the orbiting planets and distant galaxies, every being and creature.

All of these and more pulsed through your parents' veins as well as through your own. The whole of the universe has gathered to form each and everyone of us. Everything

nourishes us and lives within our being. Our parents return to the Ultimate Truth of sharing and giving back to the universe. They share of their elemental selves and go on to empower life just as they did in the very birth of their children. They are sharing life again. And we, too, will come to the moment when we will share and join in Shared Unity and the Ultimate Truth. All the things that our parents were have not disappeared but are in so many fine elements, already generating and swirling together to be in some wonderful present form.

Could it be in the blossoming of a tulip, a cascade of mountain water, some new forming galaxy? Our parents are also very much alive in their offspring of children and grandchild. They and everyone are joyously alive and connected to everything, everywhere. Our family and friends are much closer than you have imagined. Your parents are right before you.

Take the time to look deeply and understand. You will see there is no birth and there is no death. We have imagined this beginning and ending scenario of life. Our self and ego image prevent us from seeing the universe for what it is. Here and now in the Ultimate Truth there is only the present, the only place we can be. There is the constant, though changing present. There is a joyous continuation. There is much, much more than an ending or beginning. We cling to ideas of self and ego and what we should be and do, but these are limiting roles and relate to fairytale expectations which have us clinging, in denial and living in fear. Letting go of our self and ego and the whole I, me, mine struggle and conflict, we join with the changing and the unfolding of the universe. We understand how our senses act and react to the world around us. All our habits and impulses have meshed to make an illusion of self and ego as we go on to struggle and be at odds with everything around us.

ISLANDS OF THE WHOLE

Our desires appear to make us seem for the moment as individuals or islands. No one can practice for us. No one or anything can awaken for us. This is something that we must do ourselves. We understand from direct experience, our very life is our awakening. But our practice goes on to lead us to the whole. We are islands of the whole. The horizon is as far away or as near as we want to make it. Our understanding can take a lifetime or here and now we can awaken to the Dharma, the way things are free of self and ego. We can once and for all finish with our habits and impulses, the acting and reacting, and the liking and disliking. There can be division and separation or there can be unity and sharing. There can be fighting and fear or there can be acceptance and patience. We are islands of the whole.

Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity—these are the four immeasurable guidelines. Our final unburdening and freedom of self and ego open us to our true selfless nature. Loving-kindness—is the generosity and goodwill we have first for ourselves and leads us on to share with all others. Without judgments or expectations, we offer our friendship, attention, our love and concern. Everyone and everything is nourished and healed by our generosity.

Compassion—knowing kindness in our own hearts, we come to offer compassion to all others regardless of the circumstance or situation. Every moment is connected to compassion (gentleness, caring, patience, kindness). It is as easy to offer true compassion as it is to be upset. It is as easy to be compassionate as it is to be selfish. We are at ease and offering well-being.

Sympathetic Joy—the happiness of accepting things just as they are. "The Sweetness of the Dharma" is being here and now in the moment just as it is. Whether it be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, we feel joy for the moment. No longer is there a self or ego to tarnish the situation or compromise our relationships. We are content and grateful for all that we have. Joy is shown in our intention.

Equanimity—centered, balanced and focused, we have awakened. Nothing is unknown. No longer swayed by our sense contacts and prisoner to the illusion of self, we are responsible for our actions. We understand the conflicts and struggles of others and offer transformation and healing through the skillful means of our great awakening. Our awakening is as much our own as that of another. We are at peace in the moment and with everything around us. We have come full circle and return not as our old self but as a part of everything connected. Enemy, friend or lover, there is no distinction. We take all to heart. We rejoice in our sharing with everyone and everything in the present.

LIFE PRACTICE

The Big Picture begins with many little pictures or moments. Our practice has been in stages of development, some pain, but always leading us on in our understanding of our habits and impulses. And yet we are always in the present moment and in touch with things as they are. We understand the moment and how we relate to it. More than just being a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral moment, we are free of our struggles and conflicts. We realize when our self and ego habits surface and lead us into judging, prejudice, attachment and aversion. Oh, I don't like that. He's such an arrogant person. I can't stand to be around him.

I'm not going in there. I don't like crowds. I'm stuck in traffic and I'm going to be late. I can't believe this! Wherever we are, here we are. This should be our motto. Our practice is for all moments, in all times, situations and encounters. Our practice is with all people and for all people. Everything is a moment of practice. There is no one or anything that limits us but our own self and ego barriers and roadblocks.

Take the time to notice change around you and how things come to be and move on. There are more hairs in your comb now a days. There are a few more wrinkles on your face, but they are laugh lines. Smiling lines of awareness. Yes, you're slower but wiser. Anyway what's the hurry? Where's the fire? Wisdom, understanding and awareness more than make up for lack of strength or speed. You realize how silly and caught up about many things you were in the past. You smile more often and laugh amused at your old self.

The next time you are out at a park, look at nature and be part of it. These are your elements, too. Leaves are falling. Birds nest. The wind gusts and carries things. Water moves swiftly along rivers or streams and nourishes life. You may come across the carcass of some animal or bird. Notice all the elements in them from sun, earth, water, and air. See how in its passing on it returns to the elements not just to decompose but share of its life energy and is sustained in other ways and forms. Know the power and force in its sharing. Everything offers its life energy and while in this body was made alive and connected thanks to many other elements. This is the Dharma, the way of the universe. This is our true nature. Know your vast identity and sharing with the world. You may now be standing here, but you are also everywhere and everything passes through, is within, and a part of you.

It is only with our self and ego intrude that situations are made good or bad, right or wrong. Our habits and impulses separate us and leave us at a distance from the simple true nature of things. Now we offer loving-kindness to all regardless of the situation or circumstance. Compassion and understanding compels us to share. Sympathetic joy is our happiness and bliss in all moments. Equanimity makes us responsible for our action and allows us to offer healing to others.

We smile a Buddha's smile. We are Buddha-like. We are awake. Smile!

CHAPTER EIGHT

FINAL PRACTICE—THE SIMPLE END



"It is like a man," the Buddha explained to the gathering of monks before him, "who as he is going on a journey should see a great stretch of water...*It occurs to him that in order to cross over from the perils of this bank to the security of the farther bank, he should fashion a raft out of grass and sticks, branches and foliage...When he has done this and crossed over to the beyond it occurs to him that the raft has been very useful and he wonders if he ought to proceed taking it with him packed on his head or shoulders...In this way I have taught you the Dharma—the parable of the raft—for getting across, not for retaining.*"

You, by understanding the parable of the raft, must discard even right states of mind and, all the more, wrong states of mind."

As he walked the dusty roads of Northern India, villagers struck by his peaceful presence would stop the Buddha.

"Are you a God?" one would ask.

"No," the Buddha replied.

"Are you a spirit?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

"I am awake." And the Buddha smiled gently.

PRACTICE AS A RAFT

THE BUDDHA REPEATEDLY used the metaphor of a raft. His awakening and insights, like our own gradual understanding and awakening, were to simply help us navigate through our own personal sea of ignorance (self and ego) and problems (habits and impulses). We weren't to cling to his words but apply them as life practice. What are words after all? They are only so many signs and messages to take notice of along the way. Life practice is more than mind games or some mysterious, hard to understand philosophy. We weren't to literally go by the letter of the law but to investigate, understand and see for ourselves. Life practice is direct experience and has everything to do with our own present situation. Just as someone who crosses a river with a raft, you wouldn't then carry that raft on your back as you marched inland?

And so the Buddha's insight and teachings are words, signs and messages. They assist and aid our own understanding, our own awakening, always bringing the insight of direct experience and life practice to the forefront. We are untying the knots of self and ego from our long-standing, conditioned habits and impulses. Once done, we are free, open and at ease. We welcome everything as a part of our lives—the pleasant, the unpleasant or the neutral. Beyond mere words, there is actual understanding, acceptance and peace in our lives.

It just goes to show, the reason for so many books on Buddhism on the library shelf isn't that anything new is being said but the understanding is "translated" through, deciphered, and given a different emphasis by each master's effort (including this humble offering!). Words, words, words! The shortcoming of words and language has made as much for the Buddha's 84,000 teachings as anything else. He wasn't saying anything new but directing the insight to each person in whatever language and by whatever skillful means necessary so the recipient could understand and gain insight. Language and words are a vehicle of convenience. They only point the way. They don't answer or practice for us. The insight comes and is found through our actual life practice. The answers are to be found in our problems.

The Buddha spoke in whatever terms or level of understanding his audience could comprehend. "These are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world... [the Buddha] uses without misapprehending them."

Just as Einstein's $E=mc^2$ is not the universe, so too, the Buddha's words in and of themselves are not awakening. As we practice, apply and come to a gradually understanding, our very life is a practice of awakening. All of life's elements and conditions are practice. This moment, our efforts and difficulties are practice. The ordinary is practice. So many words to convey the simple fact that our self and ego notions, through attachment to our senses, make for an illusion of permanence to things, and the problems are played out over and over again—or not!

Three months before, the Buddha announced his future demise. Monks flocked to see him. There was one who did not, Dhammarama. The other monks complained. The Buddha summoned Dhammarama to come before him. Dhammarama gave his reason for not visiting the Buddha as there was no Buddha. The Buddha was not the Buddha of body and word. There was no self called the Buddha. The Buddha complimented Dhammarama for his deep understanding. Dhammarama honored the Buddha by his full awakening.

We can be human without being desirous. We can cry without anger or bitterness. We can share without prejudice. We can love without expectations or discrimination. Suddenly the world blossoms before us. We are not alone or individual, but connected and involved. We isolate our selves because we try to possess and control circumstances. We are hurt because we cling to our problems and our self-identity rather than releasing and forgiving. Now a deep understanding is part of us. Awake, we can rest at ease instead of possessing, needing, craving or in aversion. We can reside in well-being, in freedom from hostility, in freedom from ill-will, in freedom from anxiety. We can know peace within ourselves.

Hardships and problems become a welcomed encounter. Should aversion or hatred arise, they are just another moment for understanding. No longer is there separation or distinguishing. Our problems contain are our awakening. Our problems are our answer. There is great joy in having come to understand our habits and impulses, our conditioned self. We see how we have finished once and for all with "birth and death," the over reacting and attachment, or fear from our senses and the playing out ("birth") of the ego-illusion drama until a bitter, painful ending ("death"). Here we reside in well-being, content with and accepting things just as they are. Things are just the way they are.

We are at peace in all circumstances—"done is what had to be done." We each have come to awaken to our personal dilemmas and realize their short-termed nature.

Our understanding and practice can be as simple or as complicated as we each make it. Awakening can come in 7 years, seven months, seven days or in one day, the Buddha noted. It all finally comes down to our tiring and wanting to be free of all our selfish habits and the repeated down falls our egos lead us into. It all comes down to how much longer we want to remain wanting and attached, hateful, fearful and bitter. Determination and goodwill compel us to come to terms with what has been for too-long, destructive and mysterious behavior.

Compassion and understanding bring transformation and healing. We have awakened from our self and ego delusion, awakened to the conditionings of our habits and impulses, and understand and perceive as though looking out onto a great mirror. We are reflected in and a part of everything, connected and touch the whole. No longer in conflict, the Buddha smiled awakened and we, too, no longer in conflict, smile awakened.

BUDDHA, DHARMA, SANGHA

(Understanding, Accepting Things as They Are, Taking Refuge in All)

There is the literal Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The historical Buddha of 2,500 years ago, the prince turned mendicant. The Dharma as philosophy. The Sangha of gathered practitioners. On this level we see how the whole spiritual practice and guidelines form and work together in harmony of awakening, insight, truth and support.

But we do not take refuge in the Buddha for him to solve our problems. Many go to the Buddha to provide a miraculous turn around in their lives and to grant wishes like some genie in a bottle. Nor is the Dharma just a code to mindlessly follow and adhere to. The Sangha is more than an idealistic group of practitioners who get together for chanting and meditation.

On the awakened level of Ultimate Truth, our practice is the living Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; alive within each one of us, surrounding us. In others and everything else, are the three refuges. Mindful, we are awake to our every breath, responsible for our every action, and connected to the world and the whole universe. We are not consumed by our problems but come to the deep understanding that not all is suffering and problems and how to relate to the untimely or unexpected. We know with certainty the uncertain will show itself sooner or later. We share the insight gained from our direct personal experience in all our actions and communications. No longer struggling and tormented, we offer transformation and healing. The Buddha, the awakening within all of us, understands and is compassionate. We have patience for ourselves and everything around us. Compassion is shared. There is forgiveness and acceptance as we go on to extend generosity to all beings and creatures, regardless. We have touched the heart of deep understanding and can no longer act and react as the tortured, resentful, angry, frightened persons we were.

Our awakening has connected us with peace, understanding and compassion. Peace is touched in all circumstances and situations. Awakening has brought us transformation and healing. The effort was ours in the beginning and the same effort is our liberation. All the bumps and tussles were a part of our awakening practice.

The historical Buddha only pointed the way. We touch the present-awakened Buddha within ourselves. We navigate the sea of ignorance, release our self and ego, and comprehend the darkness of our fears, doubts and prejudice. One monk, Wakkali, was chastised for staring at the Buddha, enraptured by his presence. "Wakkali, what shall it profit you to look upon my body? Whosoever beholds my teaching, he beholds me." There could be no copying or hero worshipping. Only insight brought about from direct personal experience liberates.

In the Dharma we not only connect to the way things are, the changing nature of all things, but know and deeply understand the connection we share with all. We have acceptance, patience and tolerance for all moments, for all beings. For too long we have been captive to a very narrow perception of reality, limiting us to pain and suffering. Understanding the Dharma, yes, we connect with everything as it is, but also open to the Shared Unity we have in common. No longer are we surviving alone but allow our defenses to drop and are welcoming. We share with everything, with everyone. We are united rather than at odds. No matter how much we struggle, we

will inevitably unite in Shared Unity. In the Dharma we understand and touch base with our true nature, free of self and ego, as all situations and conflicts lead to peace.

As final practice, the Sangha is not just a group of common practitioners but an opportunity to take refuge in all; in everything and every moment: the pleasant, the unpleasant and the neutral. This is the Middle Way, our self expectations ended. We find harmony and connection with all. Our practice is about accepting and joining together. No one thing, any one moment or person is foreign to us or an enemy.

Our awakening has evaporated all our ties to self and ego. With an open attitude, we embrace each moment and encounter as an extension of ourselves and truly know no separation or antagonist. Each moment is valued, lived and understood. Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are just names. Should we allow it, behind all our contriving and our aspirations has been awakening, peace and freedom. No longer are we filled with concepts and schemes. Good and bad, right and wrong mean nothing. We dwell in equanimity, balance and well-being. Everything is a moment, nurtured by and existing with everything else. We are connected rather than at odds; welcoming not in conflict. Finished with separating into extremes of pleasure and pain, liking and disliking, win or loose, all our efforts (the hardships and triumphs, too!) have lead us to the simple awakening of acceptance and sharing. Understanding we are Robert and Jane, whoever or whatever, communicating through a limited organic body in the present moment, yet we are so much more. Everything flows, touches and nourishes us. Nothing is separate, alone or neglected. Beyond our current roles of mother and father, banker, nurse, mechanic, professor, grocer, lawyer, farmer or monk there is peace of being just as we are.

We are elements in a great universal metamorphosis. No one element, being, creature or person can be omitted or ignored without it affecting all others. Regardless, everything and everyone is valued and necessary. Everything is sacred and divine. Everything is everything else. Today we are persons working in a forty story skyscraper, tomorrow who knows where this ongoing metamorphosis will take us.

Our practice can be as difficult or as simple as we like it to be. As long as we remain on the self and ego level, pain, anger and torment will provoke us on to other hardships. In Final Practice we understand our current role and situation as communicators of a profound, understood sharing and are a part of a wonderful change. No birth or death, no self or ego, no habits or impulses, just being the moment, accepting and abiding in peace with all.

Having made it to the end of this Dharma offering—through meditation, the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, Loving-kindness, the Noble Eightfold Path, through non-self and on to deeper understanding, insight and compassion—awakening, you have to know, you have realize the wondrous understanding gained by a regular, mindful spiritual practice. How could you now turn your back on this awakening? You can never be the same. You can never return to that person dominated by desires, filled with bitterness and anger, lost in the conditioned illusion of self and ego. You are free. You are once and for all free of your habits and impulses, acting and reacting,

liking and disliking. You are now awake. The dust has been wiped from your eyes. Ignorance has lifted and now you truly know. We may stumble but we right ourselves, understanding any misdirection. Understand what has tripped you up and apply the "faux pas" to your awakening. Finished with getting on the merry-go-round and the birth of problems and conflict, now you know and understand the reason behind the Buddha's smile.

Smile the smile of awakening. Smile the smile of acceptance and peace. In the Middle Way between all extremes and our struggles is peace and acceptance.

NIRVANA, The Simple End

Nirvana gets a lot of mention as though some paradise or divine diploma awaits us. But awakening is no farther than our next mindful breath or smile. Literally, Nirvana means the end of thirst or craving; or something like a fire running out and not having the fuel or material to feed the flames anymore. Practically, it means the end of selfish, ego-filled views and desires and the separating and judging that our self and ego views and desires lead us into.

It is selfish thirsting or ego craving that keeps us wanting, needing, lusting and in a constant state of conflict and agitation (more and more possessions piled up in our closets and garages; notions of right and wrong; blinded by anger, resentment, bitterness, prejudice, etc.; and in denial and attached, seeking gratification through sensual pleasures and adventures, or in fear and keeping unpleasant things at a distance).

It is our habits and impulses and our personal histories which have conditioned our self and ego image, and which keep us enslaved and adding fuel to the fire of selfish acts. The cycle of "birth and death" relentlessly plays itself out again and again. Our egos lead us to reliving like downfalls and is the spark to the flame of all our hostility, problems, hardships and suffering.

Can we come to the end—the end of wanting, even the end of wanting to know and our searching for something? Can there be nothing more than the peace found in the present moment? A group of monks arguing a Dharma point went to the Buddha. "In all my years of teaching I have never said anything." The Buddha answered and walked away. Any answer would only have fostered a right and wrong self view, and separation. The reward for all our efforts is simple peace and acceptance of how things and for what they are.

Now we have come full circle to know ourselves for who we are not! We have struggled so long to release and be free of our dominating, habit-filled self. A paradox, but our deep understanding and direct experience has brought us to who we are without clinging to a someone.

Our six senses are instruments of contacts and understanding rather than forming into habits and impulses, acting and reacting, liking and

disliking. The puppet strings of self and ego, which have kept us tied up and entangled, have now been cut. In contact with the moment-to-moment, changing course of the Dharma, we are a part of the bliss of every thing, form, moment, being and creature. Our wanting and needing to promote personal agendas or fighting and in conflict with have vanished. We are at ease. What is just is.

The Buddha said very little about nirvana. It was to be discovered through the Middle Way, free of our self and ego image. He did not want our selfish, ego nature to come out and corrupt this simple understanding or taint our awakening. There was nothing more to say, no more notions or words or dialogue to try and further self describe something that never was and only existed as a confused fantasy. In Nirvana, no longer is there a self to say anything about! Even recognizing of a self, that final spark and ember of ego flame, is extinguished and finished.

The Buddha was awakened. Now it is our turn to awaken and be free of all our self and ego nature. Set aside and done with was personality, character, habit and impulses, acting and reacting, liking and disliking...separating and distancing from the world and the universe. There would be no more birth or death, conflicts or struggles. There is only the ease of being in the moment whatever it holds for us.

LIFE PRACTICE

At times we can get caught up, serious and ridged in our practice, having certain expectations or over zealous in our determination. But the helpful Middle Way is always there to steady us. One hard-bent monk, who had played a string instrument of ancient times, was guided by the Buddha to be not too "tight or loose" in his practice, but to be "well-tuned" (the Middle Way) in his observance and at ease, natural.

Remember, the Buddha, too, fought through years of austere practice before he realized the shortcomings of his one sided efforts. Each of us needs to observe him or her self for tension, unhappiness or laziness. Be a friend to yourself in this practice. Don't corner or limit

yourself into do's and don'ts. We can't force our awakening. Understanding is gradual and comes of its own accord through direct experience.

The Buddha thought of our practice and awakening like a lotus coming forth from the muddy depths toward the light above to blossom on a warm pond surface. It all takes time. Don't be in a hurry or get discouraged. Notice if you're struggling or agitated. Little by little your practiced mindfulness takes deeper root. Your awareness becomes keener, your patience greater, understanding blossoming in more and more situations. Just take note of yourself, follow your body and mind, your acting and reacting, habits and impulses. Practice responsibility in action and be accountable for yourself. But practice patience, too. Smile, you are doing all that can be done. You are a success.

Breathe mindfully, breathe happily. You are awakening. You are a disciple of the Buddha. You are as sacred as one of his original disciples of 2,600 years before and as important, because future generations will follow and succeed you on their spiritual journey. Be grateful for your gradual awakening. What an opportunity to stop the

suffering, the pain, the hardships and the struggles. We identify, understand and transform.

It is not unusual to weep during your practice for your gained wisdom and understanding into your problems and suffering. Acknowledge your freedom and happiness. Look at all you have been through, overcome, and have come to understand. The reward of your spiritual

journey is awakening and peace, all in this life, in this moment. There are so many, unfortunately, who still fall victim to their habits and impulses. Their time will come, but give yourself credit for your perseverance and all the trials you have been through to now fully understand and be awake. You are enlightened. You are a Buddha of deep understanding and compassion. You are a bodhisattva, one on the path of awakening. This spiritual journey is eternal, the path always to be charted and renewed. How fortunate that we can understand and transform ourselves.

A spiritual practice can be challenging at times as we look over the precipice of what we have been for so long and teeter there scared of the unknown or just to completely let go. But, rather, look at how fortunate and rewarding this awakening of yours is. At least you have the aspiration and know that not everything has to be suffering. You are able to guide yourself with patience and understanding through hardships and problems.

"Do not think lightly of goodness," the Buddha noted, "saying, 'Nothing will help me improve'. A pitcher is filled with water by a steady stream of drops. Likewise, the wise person improves and achieves well-being a little at a time."

Smile, you are awake!

May BuddhaSmile serve as an avenue
for understanding and compassion.

May you all be blessed.



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